

Shaping Character in Teens is Key to Building Resilience

People with strong core values make the greatest contributions, have the best sense of self, form the most secure and healthy relationships, and build the strongest communities. They are also happiest and often feel gratified and successful in life. People with strong character strengths are more resilient because they have the ability to return to a set of core values during trying times.

We need people who know how to do the right thing, even when others are not looking. We need to prepare our youth with strong character strengths so they can lead us into the future.

Adults must notice and nurture adolescent's inherent character strengths and can teach and reinforce others. We do so best when we model good living. And with good modeling, we can be pretty sure our children will develop strong character strengths themselves. We are positive role models when we show our young people that we constantly work to improve ourselves, and that it's okay to have flaws.

Character strengths can roughly be divided into two groups — performance character strengths and moral character strengths. Performance strengths predict success at school and work. They include qualities like tenacity, stick-to-it-ive-ness, and [grit](#). Moral character strengths involve qualities like commitment to justice, fairness, and universal respect for others. They also include personal ways of interacting with people like generosity, forgiveness, honesty, caring, and loving kindness. Moral character enables us to be resilient and to experience gratitude even during challenging moments.

The 7 C's of Resilience

Character is just one of the qualities needed to successfully develop resilient youth. Others include [confidence](#), [competence](#), [connection](#), [contribution](#), [coping](#), and [control](#). Together these make up the [7 C's of Resilience](#), first described in [Building Resilience in Children and Teens](#). They are known to be [essential](#) for positive youth development. None of the C's stand alone; they are deeply interrelated and build upon each other.

Together, these elements prepare young people to withstand and recover from challenges. Using common language allows parents, teachers, and other youth-developing professionals to more easily work together toward the mutual goal of raising a generation prepared to lead us into the future.

These qualities are not something we give our teens. Rather they are strengths our children develop. As their guides, we are highly influential in whether or not our teens will ultimately possess these protective qualities. At the Center for Parent Teen Communication (CPTC), we are committed to helping parents support the development of the 7 Cs.

In a society that fosters the importance of winning, we must reinforce that it is how we play the game that defines us.

Our fast-paced society values personal success. But we must be sure that our teens also value kindness, cooperation, sharing, and compassion for others. In a society that fosters the importance of winning, we must reinforce that it is how we play the game that defines us. In a culture where independence is a sign of success, we must communicate that the strongest, most fulfilled people are those who admit they need others. These issues pose some of the heftiest challenges of our times. Parenting isn't easy and sometimes it involves swimming against the tide. But doing the right thing defines character, doesn't it?

It's Not Always the Path of Immediate Pleasure

Immediate gratification is a powerful motivator. Who doesn't want pleasure

now? But we know that the people who ultimately achieve their goals are those that can delay their immediate wants — they have those performance character strengths tightly tied to self-control.

When we support our teen's tenacity and grit, we plant in them the seeds of future success. We do this when we reinforce values like thrift that allow them to save now and later invest in something more meaningful to them. We do this every time we honor and [recognize their effort, rather than the result](#). We do this by preparing them to be future-oriented so they work harder and make wiser decisions today and are well equipped for tomorrow. These young people will soon learn that more planning, design, and thoughtfulness up front produces better results in the end.

Reinforce, Don't Preach

Telling young people how they should behave doesn't work. It might even backfire. Nobody likes being told what to do — it implies that they have a weakness you are trying to overcome.

So how can you best shape the adult your teen is to become? Reinforce your teen's best self. Nobody knows what is already right and good about your teen like you do. When you frame teens positively it does more than reinforce character. It protects them from those who might harm how they view themselves. It's vitally important to be rooted in who you really are during adolescence when so many others try to define you.

Ask yourself, what are the things that really define your teen? Compassion? Caring? Fairness? Generosity? A healthy dose of stubbornness? A drive to get things done? The ability to bounce back after tough times? Humility? Gentleness? Sensitivity? Toughness? A can-do-it attitude? Gratitude?

Let your teens see themselves as they deserve to be seen. Through loving and respectful eyes. Recognizing their strengths does more than help them feel good about themselves. It positions them to understand that they

possess the capacity to do the right thing. To move beyond temporary setbacks and to correct mistakes.

Show Empathy, Honor Sensitivity

One key to raising teens who will treat others with fairness and kindness in the future, is to treat them with empathy today. Our empathy teaches them to listen to their own emotions. When we allow them to process their feelings, we support their emotional maturity and health. On the other hand, if we belittle their emotions, even in an effort to help them get past discomfort, they'll learn to block their feelings. They won't value sensitivity and will be less likely to empathize with others.

Model, Model, Model

Our children develop character through the core values we teach, our words of praise, and the way we correct them. They learn through daily interactions outside the home and by watching how adults treat each other within the home.

Our children also hear our silence loudly and clearly. Being passive in the face of injustice and inequity is making a statement. Be the kind of person you want to see as a reflection in your child's eyes. If you live by that thought, you'd do the right thing — even when nobody's looking.

Living by core character strengths isn't just about treating others well. It enriches us and enhances our own sense of security and well-being.

Take a look at the wealth of ideas, backed by solid research, from [The Greater Good Science Center](#). Their pieces will help you understand both the "whys" and the "how-tos" regarding some key character strengths, like gratitude, forgiveness, and generosity.

Forget Perfection — Work on Improvements

What makes us good models is not that we are perfect, but that we openly work to improve ourselves. What makes us good parents is not that we have all the answers. It's that we care about our job and are thoughtful as we perform it. One of the many great things about parenting a teen is that you can engage in authentic discussions about how we struggle to reach a goal, even if we are not yet there. There is often more to model as you walk the journey than there is once you're comfortably at your destination.

Expose Teens to People of Good Character

Take some of the pressure off of yourself. There are good people everywhere. Role models abound. This is one of the many reasons you want your teen exposed to adults in academic, athletic, spiritual, and youth development settings.

Reassess Yourself

Yes, our fast-paced society values personal success. It also values some things that you wouldn't if you really thought about them for a moment. Just as we asked you to see all that is right and good in your child, we now ask you to do it for yourself. Remind yourself who you really are. Perhaps you have strayed, but your core goodness is there. Forgive yourself. Be grateful for what you have, including the privilege of being a parent.

Citizenship and Building a Stronger Nation

We need the younger generations to tell us old folks what we're doing wrong, question our decisions, and point out our hypocrisies. In fact, we rely on them to improve our world . . . generation by generation. Young people need strong character strengths to make the greatest contribution. We need them to value what our nation stands for and to enthusiastically participate in our democratic processes. We need them to treat each other with integrity, honesty, and fairness. This means that even though we draw

strength from those with similar views and life experiences, we know that others with different life experiences have plenty to teach us. We must respect those differing views, listen with empathy, and understand that each person contains wisdom within them. We meet in the middle.

It is said, the future will be built on well-worn paths between neighbors. This is what assures our continued success as a nation.

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Supporting Character Strengths to Build Resilience in Teens

Parents can help build resilience in teens by identifying, cultivating and supporting character strengths.