

Values Go to School



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Exploring Ethics with Children

“The interactions that go on
—with your parents,
the school, your friends—
that’s where
values come into play...
it’s *the process*.”



Why do values go to school?

EVERYTHING WE DO REFLECTS OUR VALUES. What we believe in, what we think is important, the kind of people we want to be, the kind of world we want to live in. At school, values are manifested in everything that goes on—in what is taught and how, and in the ways people interact with each other in the communities of the classroom and the school building. As much as children are learning specific information and developing knowledge about the world through their studies, they are learning about and forming their own values through the curriculum and through their life at school. Which values do we want them to be developing? And how are values being conveyed in school? The documentary *Values Go to School* explores these issues by spending time in classrooms at four schools in quite different settings, with children ranging in age from five to nineteen. Teachers, administrators, parents and the students themselves speak about ways ethical issues arise and are explored at school. The values discussed include respect for individuals and their differences, respect for one’s own and other people’s work, non-violent resolution of the conflicts that inevitably arise among people, belief in the ability of every student to learn, the democratic practice of classroom life, and the importance of taking a reflective stance toward the whole range of challenging issues posed by growing up in a complex world.

How do values go to school?

From the moment children enter a classroom in the morning they encounter the values held by their teachers and administrators. The classroom design, the materials available to them, the curriculum they explore, the ways that adults speak to them and how their behavior is reacted to—all result from choices and responses reflecting values. Some schools have philosophies that embody values in a deliberate way. All schools have operating cultures and principles that reflect values. All adults who work in educational settings have personal values that are reflected in everything they do. Effective educators think a great deal about the explicit and implicit values their schools demonstrate and teach. Whether this happens formally or informally, reflection on values should be a crucial part of every school's work. In the sections below, we consider some of the ways schools can foster values discussions and values education.

“Children are being taught values every day—the question is, *which* values?”

Values come to school in many ways. Children bring the values of their families and cultures to school every day. Parents look to schools to support the values they hold most important at home. School districts and state educational governance bodies mandate curricula and practices that both reflect and influence the values of the classroom and school building. When all these sources of values converge, a strong partnership is formed that can facilitate children's ethical growth. What happens when, almost inevitably, home and school values don't coincide?

When teachers and administrators don't agree on everything? When meeting individual needs and those of the group, both important values, conflict? When one's own competing values may be a source of internal conflict? It is at these moments that the importance of ongoing consideration of values and how they play out at school is most crucial, and most valuable. We look at these moments as times of great opportunity for learning, and at some of the ways teachers and parents can make the most of them.

How can we create an environment where values can be explored?

Meaningful dialogue about values can only take place in an environment where everyone feels safe. The community of the classroom, and the school, provides the kind of setting where people can safely explore what they think and how they act, only if:

- Everyone is respected, whether or not we agree with them
- Physical and emotional safety is assured
- Everyone's voice/opinion can be heard
- Individual and group differences are noticed and respected
- Exploring issues is valued over acting on assumptions or impulses
- Time is provided to listen and think, and to work together to answer questions and find solutions





In classrooms, whatever the age of the students, these principles can be established in many ways: through talking about and writing down community values and rules; through formal and informal ways of giving each person a chance to be heard; through frequent meetings to discuss values issues that arise during classroom and school life; through the inclusion of all students, teachers and parents in the community in both explicit and implicit ways—so that each member of the community finds his or her views reflected in the life of the community. Although creating such a classroom community begins on the first day of school, it can be expected to take many weeks, even months, to fully develop. Students will appreciate being involved in the process of creating their environment. The single most important factor is their teachers' attitudes—as heard in words and seen in actions.

In school buildings, these principles will be manifested in the processes by which decisions are made, concerns dealt with, and conflicts resolved. The network of relationships among educators, students and family members reflects and contributes to the values of the community. The respect with which all staff members are treated and all parents and children are welcomed will greatly influence the way daily life proceeds. In the larger educational community, school district and professional commu-

nity, the ways teachers and administrators interact also affect the life of the community. If teachers, or other staff members, do not feel they are respected and have fully participatory status in the school or larger community, this should be the first topic for exploration.

Parents and teachers, the natural partners of the educational process, often find it difficult to explore their common and different values, although this exploration can be crucial for the children. Each group may make assumptions about the values held by the other group, and these assumptions may often be incorrect or too limited. Parents are naturally distressed when they believe their family's values are not being upheld at school, and teachers likewise are concerned when they believe parents are not supportive of what they are trying to do at school. However, in schools where parents and teachers find ways to speak openly about these issues, common ground is most often found to be greater than anyone expected. A variety of smaller and larger meetings can be held in which parents and educators can discuss particular values issues. How specific differences are handled in a classroom for example, or the issues arising from discussion of a particular assigned reading book, would be valuable topics for a meeting between the parents and teachers in one class. A grade-wide parent-teacher forum to discuss social issues arising in a particular age group would bring together parents and teachers

“Believing in ourselves and what we can contribute—that’s a value, and it prompts us to take *seriously* our work and our lives.”

from different classrooms. An all-school meeting might explore issues of race, class, gender or religion, as these issues come are brought to school from the families' diverse cultural backgrounds. Essential to such meetings is the idea that values exploration is a process, each conversation a step on a long path of listening and collaboration.

Does values education proceed best through the curriculum or from the life of the classroom? In many schools, values education is seen as naturally proceeding from the curriculum. A study of a historical era, or a culture different from one's own, can provide the basis for an exploration of the ways people live and what they value. Students can readily respond to literature by discussing their thoughts and feelings about issues raised by what they have read. A science unit on the ethical issues arising from internet use, or animal experimentation, can prompt valuable conversations about values. The illustrations in a picture book or a textbook; the examples brought up in a social studies class; the cultural material introduced in a language class—all reflect values and contribute to their discussion. All curriculum content and materials can provide bases for thoughtful values exploration. In some classrooms, specific “values curricula” are



“What is *fair*, what is *right*, what is *important* in life—these are values, and from values come choices, our day to day decisions.”

implemented, either by mandate or individual teacher choice. Sometimes referred to as “character education,” these topics and materials offer a way to discuss values issues—from conflict resolution to valuing differences—at a specific time in a specific way. It is our experience that such curricula are not necessary, because everyday life in the community of the classroom provides many occasions for tackling such topics and indeed requires that we do tackle them. It is not necessary to arrange for pretend or hypothetical conflicts when actual ones occur regularly among any group of people. A classroom occurrence is a more immediately interesting spur to discussion than a planned lesson which presents the same kind of event. And the discussion and any resolution that ensues will be far more meaningful to the students if the case in point is real rather than hypothetical. In a classroom that is developing comfort with discussion, overseen by a teacher who draws on community life as the raw material for values exploration, there will be ample natural curriculum generated by life in school and those aspects of life outside school which come in each day along with the students. The academic curriculum and the social and emotional intellectual curriculum provided by life are the best sources for values explorations at school.

How does values exploration facilitate growth?

The kind of educational work we have been discussing clearly facilitates social and emotional growth for students. However, this kind of work also relates to more formal academic growth in a variety of ways. Students who are respected, who are encouraged to explore their own values, come to value themselves and their work. Values reflection leading to choices about behavior fosters intellectual development. Being able to step back and consider alternatives, to test abstract ideas in practice, and to articulate one's ideas orally and in writing, is the basis of the kind of abstract thought required for higher-level academic work. Learning to make choices that reflect one's belief about what is important and right can lead to a lifelong process of choosing in line with one's values. In turn, such choices help kids survive and live meaningful, productive lives, perhaps even in a world that is better because they put their values into action.



Can you do this at your school?

Perhaps you are thinking that this kind of values exploration does not and maybe cannot take place at the school where you work or the one your children attend. Perhaps it is not a setting where such explorations have comfortably taken place. Perhaps you have been involved in a conflict of values with a teacher, a parent, a colleague or a supervisor, or your own values are conflicted. Values and conflicts go hand in hand. When people have conflicting values, or when one's own values conflict, there is turmoil. However, these are also the times of greatest opportunity for values dialogue. Some suggestions:

- Start small: find one or two colleagues, or fellow parents, with whom to have an open discussion.
- From that conversation, decide on a couple of questions to pose for discussion in a larger group, with people who you imagine may not all agree with each other. Work to make the setting safe (often this may mean starting with an informal, off-the-record meeting).
- If support is limited, seek out colleagues from other schools or parent bodies, explore school reform Web sites, talk with people who work in or whose children attend other schools to learn how things are done in different settings.
- Find professional development and/or parenting forums where you can think and talk about these issues with others who share your interest.
- Above all, never accept anyone's saying that values are either not meant to be part of education or are a luxury some schools cannot afford the time or energy to explore. There can be no "values-free education." And the exploration of values is a necessity schools cannot afford to ignore. Values underlie everything that happens in schools; the more people participate in exploring which values are taught, the stronger the fabric of the school's community will become and the better educated the students will be.