

## Kindness and Respect: Bringing the Message Home

### PCN Forum

Joe Cavanaugh, March 19, 2007

Joe Cavanaugh, founder of Youth Frontiers, opened his talk with an exercise for the audience to give us a flavor of the Youth Frontiers Kindness and Respect Retreats for kids. We asked each other thought provoking questions (What was your favorite toy as a kid? Who is an adult in the community you respect? Who in your school got bullied and why?) in a timed whirlwind of introductions, music and conversation. In Joe's words, the retreats are "MTV meets Aristotle."

Then Joe turned to the focus for parents: reminding us to impart to our kids the importance of character, the consequences of not living up to character, and five character traits we can emphasize.

Character is who you are when no one is looking. Statistics show that 98% of teens say honesty is one of their highest values, but that 84% lie to their parents and 65% cheat on exams. Character is living what you value, and doing it now. Kids cannot wait for character to come like beauty for the ugly duckling because the path kids take now is the path to where they are going. Also, Joe stressed that the secret to a good life is living a life of character.

Joe then addressed the culture of schools. First he talked about bullying, or tormenting, which is an ongoing abuse of power of the class against one kid, which can come in the form of physical, verbal, rumor or exclusionary abuse. Tormenting is a moral issue: kids need to show respect for fellow human beings. Socrates taught that schools should make kids both smart and good, and what makes a school great is not just the metrics, e.g. test scores, but also thoughtfulness and caring.

The talk then turned to changing the focus from wanting kids to feel good to wanting kids to be good. Parents have the ongoing job of communicating non-stop about the importance of character.

Five virtues of character to address are: Respect, courage, humility, temperance and purpose.

Respect includes respecting yourself, respecting others, and using technology respectfully. For instance, when you are talking with someone and your cell phone rings, either turn it off, or, if you must, politely excuse yourself before taking the call.

Courage means teaching kids to stand up for their values, and taking the risk to do what is right. Although only 7 to 10% of kids are bullies and 10% of kids are bullied, the other 80% are bystanders. The bully has no power without the bystanders, and they have the power to change the tone and show respect for the child being tormented.

Humility includes the tendency for parents to shelter their kids from failure and losing. Parents can teach their kids how to lose with dignity, say “I am wrong”, see other points of view and to win graciously.

Temperance means self control, self-discipline and restraint. Kids need boundaries and rules. Joe also stressed the need for kids to learn to negotiate and to figure things out for themselves.

Purpose can be expressed as not just feeling good but being good. A practical tip for teaching purpose is not to ask older kids “What do you want to be when you grow up?” but to ask “What are you going to do to make the world a better place when you grow up?” There is a difference between a job and a calling, and this can inspire kids.

Joe concluded by answering a few questions and inviting the audience to e-mail additional questions to the Youth Frontiers' website, [youthfrontiers.org](http://youthfrontiers.org). He challenged the audience to change our greeting from "How are you?" to "How are the kids?" as another way to enhance a community that values kids.