COUNT ON
CHARACTER
Count On Character

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Sources:
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“Kind” might sound like plain old “nice,” but it doesn’t end there. “Kindness” includes “friendly,” “helpful,” and even “sacrificing.” Acts of kindness have one thing in common: You do them to help someone without expecting anything in return.

How much do you count on kindness as an important character trait? Find out by completing the activities on this page.

1. On a sheet of paper, write down five examples of kind acts that you have given or received in the last few weeks.
   • Divide into groups of four or five and share your examples.

2. While still in small groups, look through the newspaper to find photographs of kindness in action. How are these people being kind?
   • Jot down the consequences of their actions and talk about your answers.
   • Now, find a photograph or news story about a person or group being unkind. Write down the consequences of their unkindness and discuss how an act of kindness would have changed the story or the photo.
   • During your discussion, add any new kindness verbs to your list.

3. Turn to the comics and find the kindest character on the page. Try to draw that character — or cut and paste his picture — in the box below. Can you find any unkind — mean, grumpy, or selfish — comic strip characters? As a class, discuss the things the characters do or say that make them kind or unkind.

4. As a class, put together a list of kindness verbs from each group’s list. As the teacher writes each new verb on the board, you write it on the lines below:

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

5. List five things you can do in the next 24 hours to show kindness to others. Be as specific as you can.

   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

6. Plan a day of kindness by looking in the newspaper for clubs or organizations that do kind things for other people. Make a list of ways you could help during one 12-hour day. Share your day with the rest of the class. (This is a classroom exercise, but if you are truly interested in helping, look for a telephone number of the organization you chose in the paper.)

7. Look at the list of kindness verbs you have written and circle the words that describe things you often do. Do you count on kindness as one of your character strengths?

8. Now look at the thermometer pictured at left. If your kindness could move up the scale, how high would it go? Shade or color in the scale up to that point.

9. Turn to the comics and find the kindest character on the page. Try to draw that character — or cut and paste his picture — in the box below. Can you find any unkind — mean, grumpy, or selfish — comic strip characters? As a class, discuss the things the characters do or say that make them kind or unkind.

10. Talk with your parents about kindness as a character strength and ask who taught them about kindness. Take one of the newspaper photos you discussed home with you tonight and ask your parents their opinions on the kindness shown.

“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”
— Aesop (620–560 B.C.)
You can count on honesty to build good character. A liar's character is weakened by a lie, even one that is never caught. Honesty gives you freedom, too, because telling a lie is a burden on your conscience and your life. One lie always leads to another.

Finally, being honest helps your reputation. Once you're seen as a dishonest person, people won't believe you even when you tell the truth.

Honesty now, is honesty one of your character strengths? You can count on these activities to find out.

1. Write down four situations where telling a lie might keep you from getting in trouble — for a while, anyway.
2. Get into small groups and discuss the situations you listed.
3. For each situation, talk about the consequences that might follow when the truth is discovered.
4. Are there ever times that honesty is not the best policy? Discuss.
5. As a group, create your own saying about honesty or truth: something like, "To be honest with others, first understand the truth yourself."

While in small groups, find a news story about three world leaders or local officials. Based on the stories or on what you know about the people, decide whether they could count honesty as a character strength. Share your thoughts with the rest of the class.
At home, ask your parents who they think are the most honest people they know. Talk about what those people do that makes them trustworthy. Share with them your group’s saying about honesty.

1. Think for a minute about the times you chose to be honest when you could have told a lie. Then list three times when you were less than honest about something. You will not be asked to share this list with anyone else.

2. Was it easier to remember times when you were honest or dishonest? What were the consequences of each situation?

3. Rate your overall honesty by filling in the thermometer at left.

As a class, write and post each group’s saying about honesty from activity No. 1. Then discuss the ways that you can tell when someone is not being honest. Write the signs of dishonesty on the lines below. Can you make a saying about dishonesty?

Turn to the television listings in the newspaper and find a show that features a person with a reputation for dishonesty. It might be a comedy, a cartoon, or a soap opera. Share your dishonest character with the class and talk about the consequences of his or her dishonesty.

Think of a recent instance when you were less than honest with another person. On a sheet of paper, write what you would say to that person if you were to “fess up” and admit that you had lied. How do you think he or she would react? Will you be able to say what you’ve written?

Look in the employment section of the classified ads. Honesty is a character strength that all employers desire in their workers, but which jobs most depend on honest employees? Write down your answers and discuss them as a class.

1. Think for a minute about the times you chose to be honest when you could have told a lie. Then list three times when you were less than honest about something. You will not be asked to share this list with anyone else.
2. Was it easier to remember times when you were honest or dishonest? What were the consequences of each situation?
3. Rate your overall honesty by filling in the thermometer at left.

At home, ask your parents who they think are the most honest people they know. Talk about what those people do that makes them trustworthy. Share with them your group’s saying about honesty.
What’s up with respect? On one hand, you’ve been told to respect your elders and to respect one another; in short, every human being deserves respect. On the other hand, you are told that respect isn’t given to you; you must first earn the respect of others. So, everybody deserves respect except you? Get into small groups and write a paragraph that explains this double standard. Be prepared to read your explanation aloud.

Athletes and coaches often talk about earning their opponents’ respect. See if you can find any examples of these comments in the sports section. Discuss the many ways that players can earn respect from other players and fans.

“Respect commands itself and can neither be given nor withheld when it is due.”
— Eldridge Cleaver
(1935–1998)

Respect is a matter of recognition:
Self-respect is recognizing that you are as important as anybody else on this earth.

Respect for others means recognizing their rights as people and understanding life from their point of view.

Respect for authority is recognizing that rules and laws — along with the teachers, police officers, and other adults who enforce them — exist so that people can live together peacefully.

Using the exercises, start counting on respect as character-builder.

In your small group, discuss written and unwritten rules for respecting people and their property in the situations listed below. Each of you take out a sheet of paper, and on one half, list ways of showing respect; on the other half, list disrespectful actions to the following:

- A teacher asks you to take off your cap.
- You want to borrow a shirt from your brother.
- Your grandmother talks to you about the old days.
- A mall security officer asks you to stop running.
While still in small groups, turn to the letters to the editor in your newspaper and read each one silently. In many letters, you can find an example of someone not respecting the rights of others. Write down the main issue of respect in each letter — who is not getting respect? Be prepared to discuss your findings with the rest of the class.

As a class, search the newspaper to find the worst examples of disrespect. Pick out four or five stories and discuss these questions about each disrespectful person:
- How did he fail to show respect for another person or group?
- Can you guess why she acted in a disrespectful way?
- What will be the consequences of his actions?
- How would the outcome be different if she had shown respect?

Over the next 24 hours, show some respect! Try to use the word “respect” when talking to your parents, friends, teachers, coaches, and even strangers (when appropriate). You can say things such as:
- “I respect your opinion and want to ask you about ...”
- “Even though I disagree, I respect your decision (or opinion).”
- “I haven’t given you the respect you deserve.”

Talk to your parents about respect. Ask them what changes they have noticed — since they were kids — in the level of respect in the following relationships:
- Student to teacher
- Kid to parent (you’ve probably heard this before)
- Average person to political leader
- Average person to sports hero
- Average person to average person

Next, share your class discussion about respect.

1. Look at your group’s answers to the respectful/disrespectful exercise. For each situation, mark with a check the actions you usually take.

2. Do you count on respect as one of your character strengths? Shade in the thermometer at left to rate the level of respect you generally show to yourself and others.

Take some respect!
You’ve been told that you’re a complex creature, but really, you can be broken down into two parts: outside and inside.

**OUTside**

Your “outside” is plain to see: height, body type, skin color, and hair. You probably give your outside a lot of attention: You bathe it, clothe it, and brush it so you look OK. You try for a certain style — even if it’s no style at all — and that’s part of how the rest of the world sees you.

List a few words or phrases that describe your outside appearance:

__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________
__________________________

“Every man has three characters — that which he exhibits, that which he has, and that which he thinks he has.”

— Alphonse Karr (1808–1890)

**INside**

The “inside you” — thoughts, feelings, and beliefs — isn’t as plain for all to see. You never give your attitudes a bath, and nobody brushes emotions. Still, you’re showing a certain style, and that’s the other part of how the rest of the world sees you. The inside style reflects your character, and you can count on character to form your reputation. Unlike your skin color or height, your reputation is controlled by you.

Look at this list of character traits that, bundled together, form your reputation. Fill in the circle beside the traits that are part of your character as you see yourself:

- Friendly
- Good citizen
- Thoughtful
- Self-disciplined
- Patient
- Courteous
- Honest
- Responsible
- Generous
- Helpful
- Loyal
- Cooperative
- Hard worker
- Kind
- Sharing
- Courageous
- Punctual
- Respectful
- Trustworthy
- Fair
- Caring
- Reliable

Now think about your reputation. Do other people see you the same way you see yourself? Look at the traits that you marked. If you believe that others recognize those traits in you, underline the word. The words with the underlines form your reputation.

In the newspaper, find a picture of someone who shares your good character traits. It could be a sports figure, political leader, or local figure. Cut out the picture and be prepared to share your “character mate” with the rest of the class.
Good character comes as a total package. You might be the most honest person ever born, but if you are mean, intolerant, and irresponsible, your honesty is overshadowed by your flaws.

For this scavenger hunt, you will count on finding examples of character strengths — or weaknesses — in the newspaper.

Divide the class into six groups, with each group taking a character trait. For each item on the list, find a story, photo, ad, or comic strip that is related to the trait. Write down the page number to share with the rest of the class. The first group to finish its list wins — and helps other groups finish their lists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindness</th>
<th>Honesty</th>
<th>Respect</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
<th>Tolerance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An act of kindness shown by a business.</td>
<td>A news story that describes the consequences of dishonesty.</td>
<td>The most widely respected person pictured in the newspaper.</td>
<td>Photo of a responsible citizen in action.</td>
<td>A news story describing a person treated unfairly because of his race, gender, or nationality.</td>
<td>A photo of — or a story about — a victim of intolerance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A news story about a generous person.</td>
<td>A person who made news by being honest.</td>
<td>A news story explaining how a lack of respect led to a bad incident.</td>
<td>News story about a person owning up to his or her mistakes.</td>
<td>An opinion column or letter to the editor urging readers to be more tolerant.</td>
<td>An opinion column or letter to the editor urging readers to be more tolerant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof that your town, or state, is friendly.</td>
<td>An ad that includes the word or a synonym for “honest.”</td>
<td>A person who shows a lack of self-respect.</td>
<td>Three movies that a responsible adult would not take an 8-year-old to see.</td>
<td>A news story about a business accused of unfair practices.</td>
<td>A news story that includes a law against intolerance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A comic strip character who demonstrates kindness.</td>
<td>An item in the classifieds section you would buy only if you trusted the seller.</td>
<td>A story or picture that shows a person who respects nature and the environment.</td>
<td>A letter to an advice columnist or a news story that describes an irresponsible person.</td>
<td>An example of a business trying to be fair to its customers.</td>
<td>An ad targeted to people who are different from you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESPONSIBILITY

Responsible comes from Latin words meaning “able to answer.” Responsible people are able — and willing — to answer for their actions. There are three ways to count on responsibility:

Take responsibility: Think for yourself.

Be responsible: Do the things you’re supposed to do.
(People are counting on you!)

Do the responsible thing: Own up to who you are and what you’ve done.

Can people count on you? Can you count on yourself? Take a closer look at responsibility in the activities below.

In small groups, discuss the following questions and write down your answers:
- What things does a responsible member of a family do?
- What things does a responsible student do?
- What things does a responsible citizen do?

As a class, make a list of responsible actions that you wrote in activity No. 1. Use a large sheet of paper for each category, and display all three lists in the classroom during your discussion of responsibility.

“From my tribe I take nothing. I am the maker of my own fortune.”
— Tecumseh
(1768-1813)
Go on a responsibility search. Look at people pictured in the newspaper and decide whether they have acted responsibly or irresponsibly. For example:

A city official who is speaking in favor of safe neighborhoods is acting responsibly by being a constructive leader. One who is pictured going to jail for theft has acted irresponsibly.

Whenever you can judge that a person has acted responsibly, mark a big “R” on his or her forehead. If you believe someone has been irresponsible, mark a big “I” on his or her forehead. Feel free to use crayons or colored markers. Discuss your thoughts.

The employment section of the classified ads lists job openings. Some ads ask for “self-motivated” people who take responsibility for their work without being prodded. Look through the employment ads and circle the jobs that rely most heavily on being self-motivated. As a class, discuss the jobs you circled. Also talk about how self-motivated students handle school work, home responsibilities, and extracurricular activities.

Looking at the three areas of responsibility in the introduction on this page, think about how you can become a more responsible person. For each area listed below, list two or three things you can do, starting today, to be considered a responsible person.

Take responsibility: 

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Be responsible:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Do the responsible thing:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Take it on

If possible, take home the newspaper in which you labeled people responsible (R) or irresponsible (I). Explain the exercise to your parents, and ask if they agree with your judgment. Also ask them about responsibility milestones in their lives:

• What chores did they do when they were growing up?
• What were their first jobs outside the home? Were they always on time and dependable?
• At what age do they think they became “responsible adults?”

1. Look at the class list of responsible actions and write down the ones that describe you.
2. How many items did you include? How many were left out?
3. Being responsible means doing your part. Rate your level of responsibility by shading in the thermometer above.
FAIRNESS

You might think there is plenty of fairness in the world, what with fair balls, fair winds blowing, fair game, fair-weather friends, fair-haireds, and fair shares.

When it comes to good character, though, count on fairness of mind. Fair-minded people play by the rules — even when they hit a foul ball. And fairness isn’t just for baseball rules. It’s for all of life’s contests.

Exploring your sense of fairness can open the door to better character. You can count on it.

“Fairness is an across-the-board requirement for all our interactions with each other. Fairness treats everybody the same.”

— Barbara Jordan (1936–1996)

1

• Make a list of at least four things in your life that you think just aren’t fair. Your list might include your bedtime, the TV schedule, your favorite team’s losing streak, or the weather.
• Get into small groups and discuss your lists. Did any of you name the same thing?
• Talk about what it feels like when unfair things happen to you. Think of one word or phrase that sums up your feelings and share it with the class.

2

Sometimes, bad things happen to people who don’t deserve it — people who didn’t do anything wrong. It seems unfair, doesn’t it? While still in your group, go through the newspaper to find stories about unfair circumstances in which innocent people suffered. Discuss these questions:
• Who were the victims of unfairness?
• What made the whole thing so unfair?
• How did the victims respond?
• How will the unfair event change them?
We aren’t born fair-minded; we learn about fairness and justice when we experience it for ourselves. A good way to learn fairness is to use the reversibility test: “How would I want to be treated if I were that person?” Between now and the next time you talk in class about character, see how often you can use the reversibility test to learn about fairness. Write down at least four times you used the test and share each example with your class or in small groups.

In a news story, find an example of someone who was especially fair and an example of someone who was especially unfair. Using a different color for each, mark their fairness factor on your thermometer and put their initials beside their marks. As a class, discuss what makes people basically fair or unfair. Are they born that way? Taught? Do they learn it themselves?

When people rely on their sense of fairness to make the right decisions, it’s important to fully understand the problem first. As a class, find and read a story in the paper about a dispute. On your own, pretend that you have been asked to play judge and deliver a solution that is fair to all sides. Write down your solution and share it with the class. Answer these questions in your class discussion:

• Did you have all the information you needed to make a fair decision?
• Would both sides be happy with your decision, or would one side — or both sides — walk away mad?
• What’s the hardest part about being a fair judge?

To bring this exercise to life, let three people in the class role-play a dispute. One person takes the role of judge and gives the other two a chance to present opposite sides of the argument.

Take this quick test to help you think about your personal fairness factor. Give each statement a number from one to 10 — one if the statement is never “you”; 10 if it’s always true of you; and somewhere in the middle if you’re somewhere in the middle.

1. I don’t let people copy my homework so they can get credit for the work I did.
2. I help people settle arguments by coming up with a solution that’s fair to both sides.
3. I am good at waiting my turn; I never cut line.
4. I never take more than my fair share of goodies or attention.
5. I never take advantage of a person because he or she is not as smart or as strong as I am.
6. Sometimes, I give away things to people who don’t have as much as I do.
7. I get upset when I see people getting good things they don’t deserve.
8. I could judge a contest and be completely fair, even if a friend were in the contest.
9. I never judge a person or event until I’ve heard all sides of the story.
10. I’m a person who always plays by the rules.

Add up your score, divide by 10 and mark the thermometer at left to gauge your fairness factor.

Show your parents the newspaper stories with the fair and the unfair people. Discuss with them your thoughts about the fairness factor in people, and ask them how they decide what’s fair in a situation. Also find out from your parents if fair always means “equal” when they make family decisions.
Of all the character traits we study in this guide, tolerance is the most misunderstood. To some people, tolerance is a solution to many of society's problems; to others, it is part of the problem.

Tolerance means to endure — or put up with — practices or beliefs that are different from your own. Tolerance is all about keeping an open — and understanding — mind and accepting difference, even if you don't agree with it.

Before you can count on tolerance as a character strength, make sure you understand it by completing the exercises on this page.

1. Write down five ways you are different from many people. Don't name physical traits; list preferences, like “big Seahawks fan,” “favorite color is loden,” or “I love classical music.”
2. Stay away from religious or political beliefs. These issues are important, but difficult for classroom discussion. Save them for home.
3. Get in small groups and share your responses. Keep your comments positive — no put-downs, please.
4. Did any of you list the same five “differences?” Try breaking the tie by naming the tastiest two-scoop combination on an ice cream cone.

“I have learned silence from the talkative; tolerance from the intolerant; and kindness from the unkind.”

— Kahil Gibran (1883–1931)
As a class, talk about the diversity each group discovered. Can you agree that some amount of tolerance is always needed, because no two people are exactly alike? Speak honestly about how your group was able — or unable — to calmly discuss differences about preferences in small things, such as personal favorites. Can you imagine how conflict erupts when intolerant people argue about the big issues of life?

• Find a photo in the newspaper that you think shows a lot of diversity, then write down the differences between the people pictured.
• Present your photo to your small group and point out the differences.
• Discuss the tolerance portrayed in the photo: Are the people tolerating — accepting — their differences, or does the photo show intolerance in action?

Tolerance should not be an all-or-none trait. A person with too much tolerance doesn’t maintain any personal standards: Everything is OK, even things that hurt others. The absence of tolerance — where “different is bad” — leads to racism, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.

How tolerant are you? Take a quick test by reading the following phrases that complete the statement, “It's OK with me if ... .”

Put a check mark at the end of the statements you can “tolerate.” If you agree with most of the statements, you’re probably a tolerant person. If you have a hard time agreeing with most of the statements, you might not be a very tolerant person.

It's OK with me if:

_____ a person of another race wants to be friends with me.
_____ a person eats food that I think is weird.
_____ people from other countries live in my country.
_____ a person of another race is in my class.
_____ the principal of my school is from another country.
_____ a person’s favorite color is different from mine.
_____ a person of another race lives next door to me.
_____ a person who dresses very differently wants to be my friend.
_____ my best friend wants to go out with a person of another race.

Tolerant people can put up with a lot before they reach an internal boiling point. What is your boiling point? Based on how you rated yourself in the Self Test, mark your tolerance level on the thermometer pictured on this page.

Lots to do at home tonight:
• Show your parents your tolerance examples from activity No. 5 and share your classroom discussions about accepting differences in others.
• Ask your folks how tolerant they think they are. If they’re not sure, give them the test you took in Self Test.
• Talk to your parents about how your family learned about tolerance. Religion? Community? Other family members?