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Can We Help Our Students Develop a Habit Mindset?

By Dr. Arthur Schwartz

There is a movement afoot in K–12 education to encourage every school to have its own Portrait of a Graduate. Whether the student is graduating from elementary, middle or high school, the intention is that every child and teen should be able to demonstrate a set of skills, mindsets, and dispositions that extend beyond proficiency in reading, writing, and math.

I love this idea. Over the past several months I’ve taken a deep dive into “portraits” at different schools and districts across the United States and each one captures, at least for me, the most essential qualities of a 21st Century learner.

But recently I had an “aha” moment. I realized one mindset that’s missing from many of these inspiring, research-grounded portraits.

The habit mindset.

I am not suggesting that every eighth grader needs to read *The Power of Habits* by Charles Duhigg (but that would be cool). Yet I am suggesting that schools (and families) should find a way to invite their children and students to demonstrate that they have learned how to form a habit – *especially a habit they intrinsically wanted to develop.*

On a personal level this idea means a lot to me. When our kids were still at home, my wife and I tried our best to foster and model a wide range of core values, including honesty, gratitude, and respect. But during my “aha moment” I realized that we did not emphasize enough that the quality our children’s lives will depend on the quality of their habits.

Let me be clear: I am not talking about study habits. In fact, for many students the term “study habits” probably gives the notion of habits a negative vibe. Rather, I want to make the case why every child and teen, before graduating (at the very least from high school), should be able to demonstrate and explain how they have formed and consistently practice a positive habit.

As a starting point, here are seven concepts that every student should know about habits:

#1 You are your habits

The research is clear: *40-50% of all our actions are done out of habit.* Each of us has our morning habits as well as our eating and bedtime habits. Simply put, our lives run on habits. Our challenge as educators is to encourage students to understand that their habits shape who they are and the sort of person they want to become. James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, hit the mark when he suggests that our identity is not what we believe but what we do with our beliefs. In other words, the best way to change *who* you are is to change *what* you do. Developing positive habits will help our students, especially during adolescence, become their best possible selves.

#2 There is a science of habit formation (what researchers call the “Habit Loop”)

Most students learn about Newton’s three laws of motion in eighth grade. But I can’t seem to find any curriculum in the United States where 8th graders learn about the science of habit formation. But they should. Every student should learn about their own “habit loop.” Whether it’s a good or bad habit, the mechanics are the same:



Cues spark our habits (for example, most students have a stable set of habits when they first get home from school) and our **cravings** are the motivating forces behind every habit (via a spike in dopamine as we start to look for that snack). Finally, the **response** delivers the **reward** (the desired thought or action that gives us relief from the craving). In short, we are captives to our “lizard brain.” We remain creatures who crave instant gratification (i.e., whether it’s eating that bag of Fritos or playing Fortnite). Yet researchers are also beginning to discover that habits persist even when we don’t value the reward as much as we once did (or even when the reward is no longer available). That’s good news for those of us who believe in the power of positive habits.

#3 Stable cues are the key to forming a positive habit

Here’s the one indispensable “habit principle” I’d want my students to learn and practice: *If cue X, then action Y.* For example, imagine every student has reflected on two or three activities that would help them be more productive right when they get home from school. The key to creating this new habit or routine is for the students to *repeat* these activities *everyday* as soon as they get home. Researchers are learning that stable habit cues are essential to organizing our mental space. Over time, repetition reorganizes our brain and becomes its own reward.

#4 Your surroundings are the invisible hands that shape your behavior

Regrettably, stable cues are not enough. Full throttle habit design requires an intentional environment design. Students need to become the architects of their personal environment. They need to become more aware of the “driving forces” that will support their habit intentions as well as the “restricting forces” that too often inhibit their intentions. Restricting forces can include friends, social media and computer games. But students also need to more fully grasp the driving forces that will help them encode new habits. These include finding allies to hold us accountable as well as putting in place a constellation of reminders and visual cues (ranging from apps, alarms and time cues to old-fashioned post-it notes, scales, and swear jars). Researchers are even learning how gamification strategies can help young people establish positive habits.

#5 Setting goals and sheer willpower won't get you to where you want to go

Emerging research is shattering our long-held myths that setting goals and self-control are the twin peaks of habit formation. Intentions alone don't change behaviors. Moreover, willpower is a muscle that depletes over time. No one can lead a life full of self-denial. Rather, students need to learn how to become planners of their habits. The research is clear: *preparation is the key*. We need to teach students how to engineer their habits so they can see patterns, anticipate failures, address weaknesses, and analyze their habit data. Students also need to learn about why so many people (including me) too often fail to cross what researchers call the "intention-action gap."

#6 Four "Habit Hacks" that work

S.J. Scott recently wrote a book titled "Habit Stacking." The idea is that we should link together a harder habit to an easier habit. For example, my daughter-in-law loves to listen to podcasts far more than she likes to wash the dishes. So she stacked together dishwashing to her favorite podcasts. The second hack is leveraging what researchers call "commitment devices." The reality is that all of us, at one time or another have broken a promise we've made to ourselves. That's why we need to share our habit plan with someone who will hold us accountable. The third hack is discovering our habit tendency. Developed by Gretchen Rubin, the core idea is that each of us needs to understand more acutely how we best respond to expectations. Finally, when it comes to habit formation, every student should learn about the power of positive affirmations. Refuting our negative self-talk with positive self-talk is a "habit hack" that simply works.

7 Habits are about getting 1% better everyday

Aristotle got it right when he wrote that "we are what we repeatedly do." What's interesting is that the best athletes recognize that forming habits are critical to reach their goals. The research also reveals that deliberate practice matters.

Habits and character formation

Most adults think about habits in the context of exercise or eating habits while most students likely connect the term to their study habits. *But what is the relationship between habits and the character strengths?* Famously, Aristotle posited that we "*become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.*" So, what does a stable habit of volunteering look like when consistently practiced by a teenager outside the context of a service-learning project at school? While Aristotle does tell us that friendships, role models, and the everyday customs and standards established by the broader community are critical to character formation, he did not offer a detailed description on how young people go about autonomously forming their own habits of mind, heart, and action. Yet these are the habits that will help a young person to practice patience before spontaneously sending that angry tweet. In sum, can we imagine together a future where every young person has developed their own habits of caring, gratitude and curiosity? I sure can.

Conclusion

Recent research tells us that educators overlook the role of habits in student self-regulation. Yet we know that harnessing the energy and power of habits is critical, especially during these stress-filled times. So, in the spirit of practicing together the virtue of imagination, can we envision a future where:

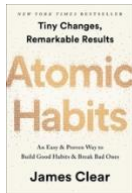
- High school seniors teach eighth graders about habits, including one habit that they now consistently practice that they didn't before learning about habits

- High school juniors sharing with their teachers and peers one habit they would like to strengthen before they graduate
- High school seniors sharing with their teachers and peers something about forming a habit that they would like to learn more about before they graduate

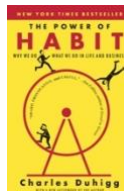
I'd love to learn from your ideas and suggestions. Please reach out to me at arthur@character.org.

Dr. Arthur Schwartz is president of Character.org, a non-partisan organization that advocates for character.

RESOURCES



Atomic Habits is an amazing book by James Clear. Check out his awesome 3-2-1 newsletter.



The Power of Habits
Thank you Charles Duhigg for jumpstarting our contemporary study and practice of habits.



Good Habits, Bad Habits
Professor Wendy Wood packs more research in her book than I thought possible. As Angela Duckworth writes, she truly is the world's most foremost expert on habit formation.



How To Change
Professor Katy Milkman co-directs the Behavior Change for Good Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania. I loved her chapter on how to overcome our "lazy" habits.

A CATALOGUE OF HABITS

(in alphabetical order)

- Cleaning habits
- Curiosity habits
- Driving habits
- Eating habits
- Exercise habits
- Friendship habits
- Gaming habits
- Good manners habits
- Gratitude habits
- Journaling habits
- Joy-filled habits (playing guitar, photography, hiking)
- Listening habits (to people)
- Meditation habits
- Morning habits
- Parenting habits
- Patience habits
- Prayer habits
- Reading habits
- Relaxation habits
- Religious habits
- Savings habits
- Shopping habits (include food shopping)
- Social media habits
- Spending habits
- Stress-reducing habits
- Study habits
- Thrift habits
- Volunteer habits
- Voting habits