

excellence & ethics

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A Report on the Narnian Virtues Project

Why Good Books Are Better When You Talk About Them

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What do you do when you finish reading with children, say, at bedtime? Perhaps what many of us do—just close the book, kiss them good night, ruffle their hair, and turn out the light.

To be sure, that time of reading together is a precious experience—the pleasure of a good story shared and the deepening of the bond that comes from a “connective ritual.” But as valuable as these read-aloud together times are, we think they very often contain a missed opportunity.

If you just close the book, you and your children—or your students, if you're a teacher—will have missed a chance to share your thoughts about the challenges the characters have faced, the choices they've made, the consequences of those choices, the virtues and vices displayed—and how all of that might apply to your own character and lives.

The Perils of Turkish Delight

Imagine you're reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the most famous of C.S. Lewis' timeless *Chronicles of Narnia*. Edmund stumbles into Narnia, realizes his sister Lucy has been telling the truth about Narnia all along, and finds himself confronted by the terrifying

Queen of Narnia looking down at him from her great sled.

The Queen interrogates him. To get Edmund to divulge what she wants to know about his siblings, she magically produces for him a box of enchanted Turkish Delight candy. The more he eats of it, the more he wants, and he mindlessly tells the Queen everything she wants to know.

When he begs the Queen for more, she demands he first bring his three siblings to her—which he promises to try to do.

Even after Edmund later learns from Lucy that the Queen is really the wicked White Witch who turns innocent people into stone, he continues to think only about how he can get more Turkish Delight—although by now he's feeling quite sick.

The Character Conversation

Consider what you could talk about if you stopped to reflect on this episode.

Is Edmund to blame for what happens here—or is he simply a victim of the Witch's tricking him into eating the Turkish Delight?

What is it about Edmund's character that makes him so easy for the Witch to deceive and manipulate? What makes him so ready to betray his siblings to get



Illustration by Jeff Anderson © Narnian Virtues Project

more Turkish Delight?

Why doesn't he suspect the Queen of being bad in the first place?

If somebody gave us something to eat or drink that made us crave more and more and made us feel sick, what would we be likely to suspect about that person and the powerful substance they had given us? Who could we go to for help?

Narnian Virtues

In our *Narnian Virtues Character Education English Curriculum*, we've posed conversation starters like these about key passages in Lewis' novels to more than 2,000 children in 57 schools in eight countries, including the US, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Cambodia, Turkey, and Mexico. We've done this



Broadway Academy teacher Brynn Davis and his students discuss Narnian virtues (Birmingham, England).

as part of a four-year research project supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. We're investigating how to use the Narnia novels to help children understand and value the virtues, apply them in their own lives, and curb bad habits that undermine the virtues.

Our classroom curriculum has children study three Narnia novels, one a year during the fall term. Eleven-year-olds read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; 12-year-olds, *Prince Caspian*; and 13-year-olds, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Classroom lessons are designed to teach English skills and character at the same time. We focus on six "Narnian" virtues (see box) and their opposing vices that are dramatically brought to life in the stories.

Why Narnia?

Why did we choose the Narnia stories to use in our international character education program? They continue to be hugely popular with children and families. To date, they have sold more than 100 million copies in 47 languages. Netflix and Entertainment One recently announced that they would be "translating the Narnian universe into feature-length and episodic

programming for years to come."

Moreover, Narnia is a universe where moral choices matter. Good choices have good consequences; bad choices, bad ones. Some characters, like Edmund, who are selfish or obnoxious

at the outset are transformed in their character as they learn hard lessons and realize their flaws and failings.

Partnering with Parents

At the heart of this project has been a partnership with parents—asking them to talk about the virtues with their children in the flow of family life and to promote their practice in everyday interactions. The *Virtue Improvement Plan (V.I.P.)* has students rate themselves on each of the 6 Narnian virtues, and then choose, in consultation with their parents, a virtue they'd

most like to improve in. They work on their "personal target virtue" for the whole fall term and talk with their parent(s) about how they're doing.

For each novel, students and parents have a *Passport* workbook with six Home Activities (see p. 7). After doing these, parents say their relationships with their children become less top-down and generally more positive (see p. 8). ■

Mark Pike is Professor of Education at England's University of Leeds, author of *Mere Education: C.S. Lewis as Teacher for Our Time*, and director of the Narnian Virtues project.

Thomas Lickona is Co-Investigator for Narnian Virtues and directs the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs. His most recent book is *How to Raise Kind Kids* (2018).

Forthcoming for parents and teachers: NARNIAN VIRTUES: How to Help Children Build Good Character Through the Narnia Stories of C.S. Lewis by Mark Pike and Thomas Lickona.

Narnian Virtues Defined

WISDOM

The habit of exercising good judgment; being able to see what is true and good and choose the best course of action. Wisdom includes *curiosity*, the desire to learn or explore something (but avoiding what is bad, such as illegal drugs and pornography).

LOVE

The habit of acting selflessly for the good of another without seeking recognition or reward; the willingness to sacrifice for others. Love includes the virtues of *gratitude* (feeling and expressing thanks) and *forgiveness* (letting go of anger or resentment toward those who have hurt us while still holding them accountable).

INTEGRITY

The habit of being true to ourselves and honest with others; standing up for what's right and following our conscience; not engaging in self-deception. Integrity includes the virtue of *humility*—being aware of our strengths and shortcomings, striving to correct our flaws, and being free from pride and arrogance.

FORTITUDE

The mental and emotional strength to do what is right and necessary in the face of difficulty; the ability to endure suffering and overcome adversity; the confidence, perseverance, and resilience to meet challenges. Fortitude includes *hard work* (pursuing a good goal with energy and commitment) and *courage* (overcoming fear when facing danger or social pressure to do what's wrong).

SELF-CONTROL

The habit of self-restraint; controlling our desires, emotions, impulses, and appetites; resisting temptation; delaying gratification in order to achieve a greater good.

JUSTICE

The habit of treating everyone with equal respect and fairness; recognizing that no one is "above the law"; fulfilling our responsibilities; admitting our mistakes and making amends.



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Sample Lesson (Voyage of the Dawn Treader)

1. Describing Eustace's Character

This task asks students, working in pairs, to describe (on the left) Eustace's character *before becoming a dragon*, using their list of 100 Vice Words. Then they describe, on the right side, his character *after he becomes a dragon*, drawing from their list of 100 Virtue Words.

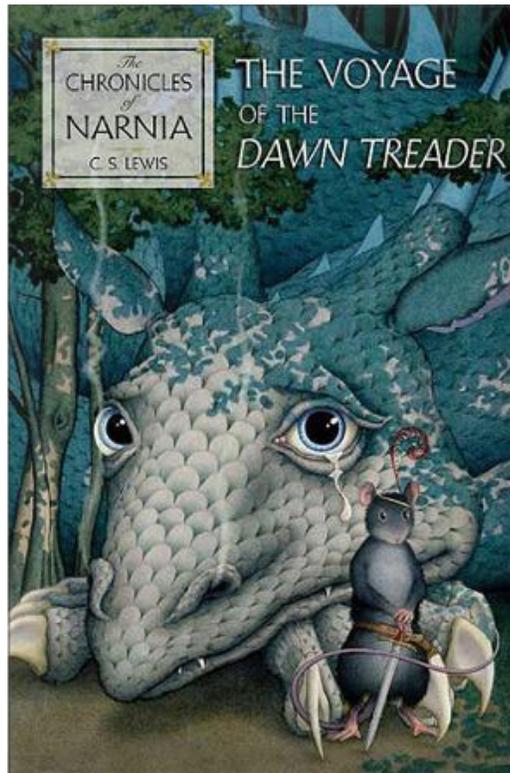
Before becoming a dragon (below are examples of vice words):

Dishonest – He tries to steal the water.

Disinterested – He just wants to get off the ship.

Rude and surly – He talks to Caspian in a rude manner.

Ungrateful – after Caspian and Edmund are kind to him.



After becoming a dragon (annotate using virtue words):

2. Class Discussion of Eustace

- What is your impression of Eustace before becoming a dragon?
- How would you feel if Eustace were your cousin? Why?
- Do you have any sympathy for him? Why or why not?
- How does Eustace's character change after he becomes a dragon? (see below)

From Chapter 7, C.S. Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

It was, however, clear to everyone that Eustace's character had been rather improved by becoming a dragon. He was anxious to help. One day, flying slowly and wearily but in great triumph, he bore back to camp a great tall pine tree which he had torn up by the roots in a distant valley and which could be made into a capital mast. And in the evening if it turned chilly, as it sometimes did after the heavy rains, he was a comfort to everyone, for the whole party would come and sit with their backs against his hot sides and get well warmed and dried; and one puff of his fiery breath would light the most obstinate fire. Sometimes he would take a select party for a fly on his back, so that they could see wheeling below them the green slopes, the rocky heights, the narrow pit-like valleys

...

Assessing Program Impact

Year-by-Year Findings

Shirley-Anne S. Paul & Peter Hart, University of Leeds



Illustration by Jeff Anderson © Narnian Virtues

To try to capture program effects, we used a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative measures. Here we report just selected findings; for all results go to <https://narnianvirtues.leeds.ac.uk>.

Overall Impact

Our most robust data were obtained in Years 2 and 3, when we had a matched control group. Our *main finding*: On average, students who experienced the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum performed better on our various character outcome measures than control group students.

Quantitative Findings: Year 1

The Year 1 findings are based on pre- and post-test data from 543 students (from seven UK schools) who studied *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* curriculum.

We found statistically significant gains for program students on: (1) our *Narnian Virtues Knowledge and Understanding Questionnaire*, which asked students to

write definitions of “virtue,” “vice,” “good character,” and each of the 6 Narnian virtues; and (2) the *Online Survey*, which asked students to select, from a list of 4 items, the two that were correct examples of a particular virtue. Program students also showed significant gains on two of our nine psychometric sub-scales: *Attitudes to Virtues* and *Empathy*.

Sample Empathy Items

- I know when people need help.
- I understand how other people are feeling.
- If I see someone hurting, it makes me feel sad.

Year 2 Findings

Year 2 findings are based on pre- and post-test data from 1,226 students (822 experimental and 404 control students) across seventeen UK schools (9 experimental and 8 control), who studied a revised version of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* curriculum.

Only the program students showed significant gains in knowledge and understanding of the virtues on the *Online Survey*. Both groups showed gains on the *Narnia Virtues Knowledge and Understanding Questionnaire*. For program students only, there was an increase in empathy that approached significance.

Year 3 Findings

Year 3 results are based on pre- and post-test data from 741 students (443 experimental and 298 control) across ten schools (5 experimental and 5 control), who studied the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* curriculum. Scores on the *Narnia Vir-*

tues Knowledge and Understanding Questionnaire significantly increased for the experimental group only. However, scores on the *Online Survey* of virtue understanding increased significantly for both groups. During year 3, program students showed no significant gains on other survey sub-scales. Control students showed significant *decreases* on every sub-scale except *Empathy*.

On average, program students performed better on the various character measures than control group students.

Parental Involvement: Years 2 and 3

Year 2 parental involvement data are based on 259 parents (from seven schools), who completed Home Activities with their children based on *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* curriculum. Year 3 parent data are based on 47 parents from one school only. In Year 2, the *number* of Home Activities completed by parents and children predicted positive student character outcomes. But for Year 3, it was the *time spent* (total minutes) on each activity that predicted positive outcomes.

Parent Interviews

The results of our interviews with 12 parents (who volunteered) from five schools suggest that *Narnian Virtues* positively impacted students’ character development and enabled parents to be effectively involved in their child’s character education (see box). ■

Shirley-Anne Paul was a Research Fellow at the Univ. of Leeds and is now with the Department of Health Sciences, Univ. of York (shirley.paul@york.ac.uk). **Peter Hart** is a Research Fellow with the School of Education, University of Leeds (P.J.Hart@leeds.ac.uk).

“Parents perceived positive effects on their child’s character and their parenting style. The virtues vocabulary gave parents a tool for addressing behavioral issues. The structured Home Activities and the spontaneous ‘character conversations’ that became more common in family life also helped students to see everyday family situations through an ethical lens and respond appropriately.

“For some parents, these interactions appeared to facilitate a shift in parenting style from authoritarian to authoritative. This is a positive outcome because research indicates that adolescents with authoritative parents are more likely to be confident and socially responsible.”

—Shirley-Anne S. Paul, Peter J. Hart, Paula J. Clarke, and Mark A. Pike, “Parents’ Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Home-Based Character Education Activities” (to be submitted).

LETTERS TO LEWIS

C.S. Lewis received thousands of letters from young fans when his Narnia novels were coming out in the 1950s. He replied to every child who wrote to him. All the original letters from the children were lost, but many of his replies were collected and published in *Letters to Children*.

Reading that collection inspired us to try to recreate the spirit of the lost letters—but now with 21st century children writing and showing how the Narnia novels are still relevant today. Our students were invited to write a “Letter to C.S. Lewis,” as if he were still alive, explaining “how reading and thinking about the characters or episodes in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* have affected you.” The samples below reflect students’ full ability range.

This book made me look at the world in a different way. I see myself as being like Edmund in the sense that my emotions controlled me. The person I aspire to be like is Aslan because he is calm and truthful. If everyone were like Aslan, it would be a better world.

John

The virtue I am trying to improve in is fortitude because I am not very strong when it comes to standing up for what I believe in. Reading this book made me want to stop lying to myself and stick to what I believe.

Robert

Edmund's spitefulness puts his siblings in terrible danger. But what he did is what everybody does. When my parents yell at me for doing something wrong, all I think about is how to do something to annoy them and teach them not to yell at me—and that's exactly the kind of thing Edmund is doing in the story.

Jenny

I enjoyed the part where Edmund sneaks off to the White Witch, but the others still show the virtue of love and go looking for him. Reading this book made me realize how important virtues are in life. If there were no virtues, we'd have no friends.

William

Before the Narnian virtues, I struggled with making good decisions. After learning the virtues, I am having fewer problems at school and am able to avoid things that get me in trouble. I have also developed some resilience so I can overcome difficult situations.

Katie

My favorite character is Lucy. She stayed true to herself and showed integrity. That inspired me and helped me think about how I can act, and to always do the right thing even when everyone else is doing the wrong thing.

Sarah

V.I.P. (Virtue Improvement Plan) for Self-Control

Target virtue: self-control. Challenges I face

1. Losing patience when my sister Kate annoys me.

2. Spending too much time playing Fortnite.

He saw that Fortnite was taking over his life. Since his V.I.P., he has managed his time on that well.

—A MOTHER

Strategies I will try

1. Ask her nicely to stop. If that doesn't work, say, "Would you please stop—or should I get Mum?"
2. Count to 20 to keep my temper.
3. Ask a parent to ask her to stop.

1. Write out an agreement with my parent(s) for when I can play each day and how long.
2. Set the timer.
3. Lose it for next day if I don't keep the agreement.

What happened when I tried this strategy

1. Asking nicely didn't work. But saying "Should I get Mum?" usually did.
2. I usually forgot to count. Once I did lose my temper, yelled at her, and stormed off in a bad mood.
3. One time I had to get Mum. Kate was mad at me for telling, but I had asked her to stop.

1. Mum and I made an agreement and setting the timer really did help.
2. Once I went 15 minutes over and lost it for the next day. But it was fair because I had agreed.

V.I.P. for Love

Target virtue: love. Challenges I face

1. Arguing with my siblings after my parents have asked us to stop.

2. Gossiping at school about people my friends don't like.



Strategies I will try

1. Say "Yes, Mum" or "Yes, Dad" — and then stop arguing.
2. Say to myself, "This isn't a big deal," and just let it go.
3. Try to get along better.

1. Look down and not say anything.
2. Say, "Gotta go" and leave.
3. Say something good about the person.

What happened when I tried it

Mum says it upsets the whole house when us kids bicker, but I get so mad it's hard to stop. Mum said there will have to be a consequence if we don't stop.

- 1 Looking down was the easiest thing to do.
2. One time I said "Gotta go" and did. That was hard.
3. Saying something good was the hardest.
4. Once I went along with what the group was saying. I felt bad about that.

Family Mission Statement

Successful schools and businesses often have mission statements that express the goals and values of the group, define its shared culture, and shape the character of its members. In a similar way, a Family Mission Statement can help identify the values and virtues you want to live by as a family.

A Family Mission Statement addresses the question, **‘What kind of family do we want to be?’** A Mission Statement that includes the Narnian virtues will also help you practice and develop your current target virtue. Below is one family’s Mission Statement (the children were 10, 8, 6, and 5). The father says, “We have it hanging in the kitchen, where we can review it and refer to it whenever we need to.”

THE DAVIDSON WAY

We live with an attitude of gratitude.

We commit to being trustworthy, kind, and fair.

We don't lie, cheat, steal, or hurt someone on purpose.

When we make a mistake, we admit it, make up for it, and learn from it.

We apologize and forgive each other.

We work to keep our minds and bodies clean, healthy, and strong.

Other Home Activities that go with reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

HOME ACTIVITY	WHAT'S INVOLVED
MY CHARACTER	<i>Student does “My Character” Self-Assessment with their parent(s) to identify their target virtue. Weekly chats assess progress.</i>
GOOD DEEDS	<i>Student does at least one good deed for someone every week.</i>
WHAT IS YOUR “TURKISH DELIGHT”?	<i>Student and family members discuss how they can each gain greater control over their “Turkish Delight.” Progress shared the next week.</i>
WEEKLY FAMILY MEETING	<i>Students and parent(s) have family meetings to hold everyone accountable for putting the Family Mission Statement into practice.</i>
MAKE A BIG DEAL OF THE FAMILY MEAL	<i>Student uses conversation starters to enhance family meals.</i>
GRATITUDE JOURNAL	<i>Student keeps a Gratitude Journal, recording each day at least 3 things they're thankful for. Other family members are encouraged to do same.</i>

WHAT PARENTS SAY...

We interviewed a sample of parents (from 5 different schools) whose children took part in the *Narnian Virtues* program. We asked parents questions such as: "What have you found valuable about doing the Home Activities?" "How have they affected your child?" "How have they affected you as a parent?"

This has given my daughter the vocabulary to say things like, "Actually, this situation is about self-control and how I can control my emotions."

—A MOTHER

Because our son has to work on love toward his brother, he realizes now that when he starts to pick on him, he's not doing his virtues, it's doing a vice.

—A MOTHER

I'm less dictatorial now and more of a listener. Our son has become more confident and seems to have found his voice when he wants to offer an opinion about something in the family.

—A FATHER

It's opened new lines of communication. Our daughter's much more open now about things that are bothering her and things she could do better.

—A MOTHER

Rather than "Mum's going off on one again," it's, "Let's talk about this—how do you think we're doing with the virtues?" Getting them engaged and talking about it.

—A MOTHER

It's enabled us to talk about some things that weren't going so well in our family, without having to bring it up as an "issue."

—A MOTHER

Because life's so busy, having these conversations about the virtues has been like pressing the pause button. You get to say, "Let's all have a think about this."

—A FATHER

The Family Mission Statement helped us ask as a whole family, "Where can we all improve?"

—A FATHER

We're all more aware now of how we're behaving. It's made us closer. It's made us stop and think and evaluate how we tackle problems as a family.

—A MOTHER

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