

Generosity: December's Character Trait of the Month

Hello, Forest Families!

Forest Charter School cares about the wellbeing of students, beyond just their academics. We are making an extra effort this year to offer lessons on character traits that we hope will benefit students of all ages. Think of it as preventative medicine for mental health: if students know how to resolve conflict, bounce back from disappointment, and persevere when things are difficult, the odds of them developing a mental health problem (like depression) are reduced.

December is the month when people make the most charitable donations. It seems like the perfect time to offer a preventative medicine lesson on generosity. Generosity improves relationships and brings greater life satisfaction to the giver. This lesson, designed for both children and adults, offers a new perspective on generosity. Being generous isn't just about giving gifts or donating money to charity: it's learning how to give other people what they truly want and need.

When my friend Kara was almost ready to have her first baby, her mother moved away to Australia. Kara was crushed. She had been imagining the time she and her mother could spend together, loving the newest member of the family.

Christmas felt especially lonely that year. The boxes and boxes of gifts her mother sent to her and the baby almost made things worse, highlighting her mother's absence. Kara sent a sparsely worded Christmas card back to Australia.

Kara grew tired of feeling resentful and abandoned. She began working with a counselor who recommended the book "The 5 Love Languages" (Chapman). Kara said it was transformative. She learned that she and her mother spoke different languages, and everything was getting lost in translation.

Kara discovered that her primary love language is "quality time," which is showing love and affection by spending dedicated time together. Her mother's love language was "gift giving," which explained the barrage of carefully chosen Christmas presents from Australia.

People tend to show love to other people by giving them what they are hoping to receive in return. Kara realized that while she was feeling unloved because of her mother's absence, her mother was hurt by Kara's failure to send her tangible signs of her love.

"Once I realized we were speaking different languages, I knew how to fix the problem," Kara said. "I started to see that the gifts she sent me were her way of saying she loved me. I made an effort to send my mom gifts on Mother's Day and her birthday. I sent my mom a copy of the book, and I told her that I'm a 'quality timer.' Mom realized that the best gift she could give me was to come home for the next Christmas. We finally both felt loved."

It is common for people to speak different love languages. The first step in addressing the translation issue is to understand what the languages are. In addition to **quality time** and **gift-giving**, there are also:

Acts of service

Words of affirmation

Physical touch

Preferences for certain love languages show up early. I suspected that my daughter might have a preference for “physical touch” when one of her first sentences was “Hold you me,” which was her toddler way of saying, “I want you to hold me.” *Although everyone enjoys receiving all five of the love languages, most people have a favorite one or two.*

I worked with a mother and daughter who favored the remaining two love languages: words of affirmation and acts of service. Lisa, 17, and her mother, Mary, were constantly at odds over household chores. Mary likes a really clean house, and she wanted Lisa to vacuum the floor every day. Lisa thought Mary was being neurotic.

I asked them to take the free love languages test at 5lovelanguages.com. We learned that Lisa loved words of affirmation (which can be written or verbal), while Mary had a clear preference for acts of service. People like Mary, who love acts of service, are the ones who believe that love should be demonstrated, not just professed.

When we reviewed their results, I explained to Lisa that when she vacuumed the floor, it was actually a way of telling her mom she loved her. When she skipped vacuuming or had to be nagged into doing it, she was sending her mom the opposite message. Lisa looked stricken.

“I thought this was just about vacuuming!” Lisa lamented. “Mom, I’m so sorry!”

The problem was permanently solved.

If you don’t already know your love language, I strongly encourage you to take the test. I also recommend that you help your children take the test (or that you take it on their behalf). The concept of the five love languages can be grasped by kids of all ages. I have used these one-minute cartoons to teach children as young as kindergarten:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJYXlhsN178u>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9SjEWWBo1g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zdpv7f9SHw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBn9NB5IT08>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJXHvGhFXyU>

Teaching children the love languages helps them build empathy and perspective-taking. Not everyone lights up when you vacuum their floor, nor is everyone excited by lavish gifts from Australia. Sometimes the best gift you can give someone is the gift of your time and attention, or a thoughtfully hand-written card. True generosity begins when you give someone the type of love that they need.

Wishing you the happiest of holidays this year,
Emily Gallup (counselor)
egallup@forestcharter.com
(530) 559-0101

P.S. Please let us know if you have questions about sharing this lesson with your children. We are here to help! Our mental health team will be back on ParentSquare next month with a lesson on January's character trait of the month: respect. We'd love to hear your feedback!