



# Integrity Is a Core Value in the OST Experience for Youth

## Marie Benson

The importance attached to the development of strong character is evident in schools, out-of-school time (OST) programs, and the workplace. As providers of OST programs, we must infuse our programs with activities that build positive social and emotional skills in order to help mold future human capital. Educators, employers, and society as a whole agree on the need for honesty and for social and emotional skills. These skills are valuable across a person's lifetime, regardless of where they are learned and practiced. Employers are looking for employees who possess competency in social and emotional skills; these skills may even be in more in demand than technical skills

(Afterschool Alliance, 2018). OST programs can prepare participants for their futures by promoting social and emotional learning.

One vital character trait, which encompasses many aspects, is integrity. According to Dictionary.com (2020), integrity is the practice of being honest and showing consistent adherence to strong “moral and ethical principles” and values. The word *integrity* derives from the same root as *integer*, which means *whole* or *complete*. According to the International Center for Academic Integrity (Fishman, 2013), the five fundamental values of academic integrity are

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responsibility, respect, fairness, trustworthiness, and honesty. Integrity is an important social and emotional skill to promote and role model to youth.

When we have integrity, people tend to trust us, even if they disagree with us. Integrity means standing up for what we believe in and choosing to do the right thing. Discovering who we are is a process for us all; it involves the complex notion of accountability to self. Integrity is a framework that does not change with context. As many professionals in the OST world agree, our programs are a great place to help to understand and practice integrity.

OST programs may be challenged to work on building social and emotional skills every day in every activity. There are limitations due to the wide variety of kinds of OST programs and their timing, funding, and attendance patterns. However, most program activities naturally will allow staff and participants to practice their social and emotional skills, including integrity. There are countless opportunities each day to provide a learning experience when issues arise with youth and staff.

High-quality trainings are necessary to prepare staff to recognize and take advantage of these teachable moments. We need to support staff in engaging, assessing, reflecting upon, and improving opportunities to build social and emotional skills in an ongoing cycle of program improvement.

Here are some activities program staff can facilitate to help participants think about and practice their integrity skills:

- Build with blocks on different types of foundations. What happens if the foundation is not solid? Why did it happen? What can we change to make it work? The lesson here is that, when you stay the course and do things the right way, what you build is stronger and lasts longer.
- Make puppets and put on a show focused on a value such as honesty. Help the children decide how to show honest and dishonest actions and the consequences of each.
- Create a match game with integrity-related pictures and words. Make cards that list words related to integrity, such as honest, reliable, stand up for what you believe in, doing the right thing when no one is looking, accountability, and so on. Then make another set of cards that have action phrases or pictures to match.

- Cook together and demonstrate the importance of following directions consistently. If you change the recipe and leave out an ingredient, you alter the whole project! Do the same recipe twice, and see what happens when you use salt instead of sugar.

Sailing provides a good metaphor for the demonstration of integrity. Your sail must be intact for the boat to sail upwind. Furthermore, if the boat heels over more than it should, it becomes difficult to control. Balance is lost. Similarly, if you stretch your values to make exceptions to your rules for integrity, then you compromise your wholeness. Integrity helps you to stay the course with each shift in the direction of the wind. Let's help our youth set their sails and begin life's journey with integrity.

## References

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