

## **Beyond Encouragement: Validating Self-Worth and Character Through the Use of “Directed Reflections”**

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### **Introduction**

Encouragement is a basic element in our work as counselors and therapists. Through the use of a new strategy, “directed reflections,” we can go beyond encouragement, focusing on the 36 core components of character, and truly validate self-worth and character. The results of this technique are profound and all counselors/therapists can benefit from its application. In this article, the strategy of directed reflections is defined and demonstrated. Suggestions for use, such as in debriefing “homework” and in character education, are offered.

Although Alfred Adler, the creator of Individual Psychology, did not focus directly on character education, he did offer one of the more important concepts to be found in the counseling literature. For Adler, the single criterion for “success” in life was embodied in the extent to which the individual possesses “social interest.” It is this concept that describes the ideal state of the individual’s mental health or what we might term today as “character.” Adler described social interest as being an aptitude or innate potentiality for living cooperatively and contributing to the good of others. However, according to Adler, social interest or character had to be consciously developed (Milliren, Evans, & Newbauer, 2003).

If we are to draw out and help develop social interest or character in others, it is important that we validate it when we see (or hear about) it happening. Our clients report the changes they are making all the time, yet we rarely see these reports as opportunities for developing character. A chance remark from a client “My wife and I were able to have a long talk together last night”—presents a tremendous opportunity to draw out character traits that are already there. We have an opportunity to reflect the underlying character components and thereby reinforce the life choices that our clients are making. Thus, character education can become an everyday opportunity.

Messer (2001) related character to the concept of self-respect. He quoted Rudolf Dreikurs, a student of Alfred Adler, as defining self-respect as “the feeling that one is a worthwhile human being in spite of one’s faults and imperfections” (Messer,2001,p. 265). This represents the “courage to be imperfect” that Dreikurs discussed on numerous occasions (Turner & Pew, 1978) and is the key to the development of character. Messer went on to say that self-respect (or character) “is not expressed in terms of ‘knowing,’ but of ‘feeling.’ It is not based on objective conditions. It is a subjective experience” (p. 265).

Table 1 lists 36 “characteristics” or components that help to define one’s character. These serve as the traits or qualities that can be directly reflected to a client in response to his/her “success” report.

**Table 1. The Components of Character**

<b>Acceptance of Unpleasant Reality</b> —to do the best with what comes one’s way.	<b>Accomplishment</b> —to know that one achieved and it was good enough.	<b>Approachability</b> — to be available to others who may seek them out.
<b>Appropriate Anger</b> —can express legitimate anger in mature/responsible ways.	<b>Appropriate Responsibility</b> —assumes level of responsibility appropriate to the situation.	<b>Belonging</b> —feeling that one is a member in good standing in the human race.
<b>.Confidence</b> —feeling prepared to cope with the positives and negatives that life offers.	<b>Counting One’s Blessings</b> —to recognize and appreciate one’s blessings.	<b>Courage</b> —knows which risks need to be taken and those that do not.

<b>Courage to Succeed</b> —to be able to risk success and tolerate a successful outcome.	<b>Equality</b> —behaving as an equal, feeling neither inferior nor superior to others.	<b>Identity</b> —to be one’s own person and have flexibility in one’s own relationships
<b>In Touch with Reality</b> —to perceive the world objectively and appropriately.	<b>Independence</b> —free from a dependence on others to validate their existence.	<b>Intellectual Self-Respect</b> —to feel smart enough in the moment.
<b>Less Vulnerable to Temptation</b> —no need to resort to mischief or self-destructive behavior.	<b>Liberation</b> —neither rebel nor victim but can solve problems constructively.	<b>Living in the Present</b> —to be able to function in the real world right now.
<b>Lovability</b> —able to love and be loved.	<b>Maturity</b> —being at an appropriate stage of development for one’s age.	<b>Positive Regard</b> —free to have a positive regard for fellow human beings.
<b>Power and Control</b> —to be able to make positive things happen.	<b>Power of Choice</b> —can make choices and live with the consequences of the the choices.	<b>Relief</b> —freedom from the pressure, tension and stress of having to prove one’s worth.
<b>Relief from Guilt</b> —feeling active remorse and able to make restitution when needed.	<b>Relief from Fear and Anxiety</b> —to have a positive view of the future and take life as it comes.	<b>Security</b> —to be comfortable in one’s ability to cope with the ups and downs of life.
<b>Securing Cooperation</b> —to be able to work in an atmosphere of mutual respect with others.	<b>Self-Acceptance</b> —feeling <i>good enough</i> as one is. “I am a worthwhile human being in spite of my faults and imperfections!”	<b>Self Respect</b> —able to live with others as equals and positively contribute to one’s community.
<b>Serenity</b> —at peace with one’s self and free to be at peace with one’s neighbors.	<b>Success</b> —possess the feeling that one is free to succeed and to be successful.	<b>Tolerance of Pain or Disappointment</b> —accepts life as it comes without despairing.
<b>Trus</b> —trusting one’s self while discriminating those worthy of trust.	<b>Trust in One’s Judgment</b> — and open to learning from experience.	<b>Unselfish</b> —having the freedom to give of one’s self to others.

From *The Components of Our Character*. (pp. 29–40), by M. Messer 1995. Chicago: Anger Institute. Adapted with permission.

The intention of a directed reflection is to draw out the elements of character that already exist for the person. The purpose is to “tag” that inner core where *belief in self* lies. Try to “hear” the following responses and note the differences.

- (1) “How did you feel about that?”
- (2) “You must feel good about how that turned out for you.”
- (3) “It feels really good inside when *you realize that you are capable of handling things for yourself.*”

The third example is a directed reflection. It is focused on the feeling component of the experience (which is similar to the skill of reflective listening, as in the second response above) as *well as* on the character component that is being evidenced by the person. It is this latter element that is so critical to identify in and for the person. We need to draw that component out in our responses and demonstrate to the individual that he/she already is acting in positive, useful, and constructive ways.

In the example that follows, the various components of character, noted in Table 1, are deliberately reflected back to the person. Each response is designed to capture a different character component. In the example, these components are noted in parentheses. We have discovered that it is best to use a five-step response sequence that includes a variation of five different components of character. This system seems to provide a broader range of validation and is most reinforcing for the client. At a minimum, a three-step system will suffice; at a maximum, anything that exceeds five different responses becomes overkill and begins to lose effectiveness.

In this example, a young woman is reporting what might be termed a “negative” success. However, even in some of the sadness about losing a relationship there are opportunities to directly reflect the underlying positive elements of character that made it possible for her to end the relationship.

YW: “I finally broke up with my boyfriend last night. You know, he was pretty abusive to me.”

CO: “As much as that may hurt right now, you sound pretty confident about what you did.” (Confidence)

YW: “I was kind of scared for a long time but I made up my mind to do it and now it’s done.”

CO: “So, you overcame your fear and took a big step.” (Freedom from Fear/Anxiety)

YW: “It was—especially for me—I don’t like to cause trouble.”

CO: “You’d rather keep the peace if you can but now you know you can take charge like this yourself!” (Power and Control)

YW: “I deserve better—he always put me down and told me I was stupid.”

CO: “And you have more worth and value than that.” (Equality)

YW: “Duhhhhh! Of course I do!”

CO: “And now you are feeling really in control of the situation.” (Independence)

YW: “Yeah. He wants to make up but I’m not interested any more.”

You will note that the preceding example includes five different directed reflections. This is important because we want the person to really “hear” what we are saying. In the event that one reflection of a character component does not quite take, we increase the odds by adding the other four. The general outcome, however, is that each of the directed reflections connects in some way with the core of a person’s being and serves to reinforce some aspect of the individual’s “inner self.”

Directed reflections require the skill of intelligent or “educated” guessing. Guessing, whether right or wrong, allows the counselor to arrive at the core of the situation much more quickly than endless fact-gathering and questioning. As we debrief the “homework” our clients have participated in, we can listen for the components of

character and use the directed reflections to respond to the successful elements. However, as seen in the example dialogue, we do not have to limit our responses to positive experiences.

If we do not get reports of successes spontaneously, we might wish to open our individual (and even group) contacts with clients with the following statements or questions: “Tell me about one of your ‘wins’ or successes.” “Tell me what you accomplished lately.” “Have you done something new that you’ve never done before?” “What kind of positive risks have you taken?” Then, get set to listen and focus on the character component. If the person’s first response does not seem to lead anywhere, then an appropriate response might be: “And how was that for you?”

In classroom groups, we can select a story with a theme or character issue. These stories can serve as a stimulus to our discussions and directed reflections. We can ask, “Have you ever had to make a similar choice?” “Tell me about it.” As the student(s) relate their stories, respond to their telling with appropriate directed reflections from the 36 components of character.

## **Summary**

The directed reflection is a new technique for validating the self- worth and character of others. A directed reflection is a response to another person that consists of a reflection of feeling coupled with a statement of one (or more) of the 36 components of character. For example, we might say: “You’re feeling really pumped (*a reflection of feeling*) when you are in control of yourself and can make positive things happen for you (*two of the components of character*).” Responses such as this provide an excellent means for debriefing a client’s “success” experience. For the greatest impact, three to five directed reflections should be used at any one time.

## **Conclusion**

This strategy should *only* be used to “catch” character when it is occurring. We cannot force the issue of character development. We

can only reinforce the appropriate components of character when we have an opportunity to “observe” them in action. The observations can be in “real” time or in the success stories others tell us—but they must exist. This is not a technique that serves as a subtle means of imparting values when they are not there, even though such action may be tempting. Moreover, it is not intended as a technique for influencing behavior change, although this is also a tempting alternative. When used inappropriately, genuineness disappears and the words sound hollow and mechanical.

When used with appropriate timing and sincerity, directed reflections usually catch just a little piece of the person’s core beliefs. It is at that core where character and social interest reside. The directed reflections go beyond merely encouraging another person. As Messer (2001) explains, we are helping the individual discover the he/she is a worthwhile human being in spite of his/her faults and imperfections.

### **References:**

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