

# Research Bite: Cultivating Personhood Begins from Young

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## What does research tell us?

Early childhood is a crucial time to build the foundations of lifelong development. Research in child development reveals that the various domains — cognitive, social-emotional, and moral— are integrated and interconnected. As such, a child's moral development is closely tied to their intellectual and social-emotional growth. Early moral development involves cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural aspects such as moral reasoning, empathy, social understanding, prosocial skills and acting in line with moral principles. Parents are the first educators of children and bear the first responsibility for nurturing moral values, followed by the children's educators in the preschool centre. Both parents and educators play a key role in children's character development.

## What is this study about?

This study, "Constructing Values – Meanings and Implications for Practice in Singapore's Preschool Education Curriculum" aimed to unpack the four core values – respect, responsibility, care, and honesty espoused in the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL): A Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education in Singapore (MOE, 2022).

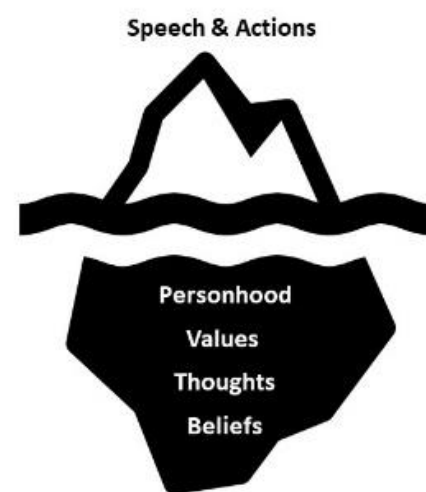
The key research questions are:

1. How can the four core values (respect, responsibility, care and honesty) be described and explained in the Singapore preschool education context?
2. What are the current practices for values education conducted by preschool centres?

This qualitative research involved interviews and focus group discussions with religious leaders, government officials, preschool leaders and educators. The multiple perspectives provided insights into the meanings and interpretations of the four values and identified other values that are important for young children's character development.

## What did we find?

A key finding from the study is the concept of “personhood”. While parents and teachers instinctively teach values as aspects of good manners, this approach often represents only the surface of a much deeper concept. If values are presented merely as behaviors and speech without an understanding of their underlying reasoning and purpose, young people may question their validity or gradually stop practising them. What is essential is the implicit foundation beneath this surface — the understanding of personhood that is shaped by one's values, thoughts, and beliefs. This is encapsulated by the iceberg metaphor where the explicit part of the iceberg is what we can see as observable behaviours, and the more crucial part of a child's being and becoming is formed by the implicit part of the iceberg – personhood.



Personhood acknowledges the inherent worth of every individual, emphasizing the need for love, respect, care, and a sense of responsibility and honesty towards oneself and others. When this understanding of personhood is embraced as a core belief, it naturally informs speech, actions, and behaviors. Therefore, fostering a sense of personhood is critical for laying a strong foundation for character development.

### What does it mean for teaching and learning?

Preschool teachers play a critical role in helping to foster a sense of personhood in children. You can adopt a three-pronged approach to values education: Live it, Embed it, and Teach it.

#### Live it:

- Educators need to believe in and live out the values they want to instill in children through their relationships and daily interactions with children.
- Educators serve as living examples of values and role models for children.
- When educators live out values, children will begin to understand and learn what is good and desirable through observation.

#### Embed it:

- Educators should integrate values into the curriculum through a comprehensive, centre-wide approach.
- Educators should dedicate time and space for values education in their lessons and learning activities.
- They can use the physical environment of the centre and classrooms to reinforce good values through visuals such as posters and artworks.
- Teachers should collaborate with parents to ensure the continuity of learning between home and centre environments and alignment in teaching and parenting practices.

#### Teach it:

- Educators can guide children to understand, explore, and apply values through explicit and implicit teaching methods.
- Educators can employ 3 key instructional practices:
  1. **Values-infused lessons and activities**, such as integrating values into lessons or setting aside structured time and learning activities to cultivate values in young children.
  2. **Narrative approach**, such as using stories or dramatisation techniques like skits, role-play and hot-seating to make values more relatable to children.
  3. **Explicit values instruction** by adopting a common language in how values are phrased, spoken and explained to children in a direct and child-friendly manner. This gives children the language for expressing and enacting values.

- Educators should also seize teachable moments during spontaneous situations and daily routines to reinforce good values.

### To Learn More:

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