



White Paper
Strong Character Development

Ingenium
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**Strong character skills enable children to succeed
in school, in the workplace,
and in the community.**

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Executive Summary

Everyone is born with talents and abilities, but you also need strong character for long-term success. Character skills are important and can be taught. These skills are foundational to controlling one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They are key to resolving social conflicts and essential in developing healthy relationships.

While the educational community focuses primarily on improving academic scores, they miss the importance of character skills that enable students to learn and perform better in and out of school. These character skills serve as building blocks for improving children’s academic success. Shown to be effective for all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or school location, are programs that teach social-emotional learning.¹

Ingenium’s Strong Character coaching resources are created for adolescents, ages 10 through 14. The Ingenium initiative provides kids, parents, and other adults who work with kids with print and online resources that support the understanding and application of a positive mindset, healthy emotions, and successful behaviors.

¹ Stephanie M. Jones and Jennifer Kahn, “The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students’ social, emotional, and academic development,” *WERA Educational Journal* 10, no. 1 (2017): 5.



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Character Skills Are Important

The stage known as “early adolescence,” between ages 11 to 14,² is a critical time when children need to develop character skills. It is a time of challenging physical, emotional, and behavioral changes. Rapid development begins in two areas of the brain, the amygdala, where emotions are triggered, and the prefrontal cortex, the reasoning and decision-making part of the brain, although development of the prefrontal cortex won’t be complete until about age 25. This helps to explain kids’ difficulty in starting and completing tasks, forgetting to turn in homework, and acting out emotionally. Children need to learn how to control their emotions and think before they react so they can do what is right and avoid saying or doing something that would get them in trouble.

As kids move to middle school, they are faced with new subjects, deadlines to complete assignments, and peer pressure, all at a time when they are trying to fit in. A research project in 2011 reported the following problem: “One of these challenges is the transition from elementary school into middle-level school, which has the potential to significantly disrupt children’s academic and social trajectories. Parents and teachers report a decrease in grades and an increase in emotional and problem behavior for students with weak executive function skills.”³

Ingenium has created an evidence-based Strong Character skills training initiative designed for students, parents, teachers, and other adults who work with kids. These resources guide kids in developing the character skills they need to succeed in school, at home, with friends, and in the community.

² Jenny Nagaoka, Camille A. Farrington, Stacy B. Ehrlich, and Ryan D. Heath, “Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework. Concept Paper for Research and Practice.” University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2015).

³ Lisa A. Jacobson et al., “Working memory influences processing speed and reading fluency in ADHD,” *Child Neuropsychology* 17, no. 3 (2011): 209–24.

The Science Behind Character Development

The traditional education model that focuses primarily on academic achievement misses the importance of character skills. These skills enable students to control their thinking and emotions in order to learn and perform better in and out of school. According to research by James Heckman and Tim Kautz, “A growing body of empirical research shows that character skills rival IQ in predicting educational attainment, labor market success, health, and criminality.”⁴

Non-Cognitive Skills – “Non-cognitive skills may be broadly defined as ‘patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.’”⁵ The skills most strongly associated with academic performance include academic perseverance, academic mindset, and learning strategies.

Social-Emotional Learning – Social-emotional learning (SEL) develops healthy emotions that help kids manage their feelings. SEL is the practice through which children gain the skills needed to maintain emotions, set attainable goals, keep positive relationships, and make decisions. Students who are offered SEL in school continue to do better than their peers on a number of indicators: positive social behaviors, positive attitudes, and academics,⁶ according to a 2017 research report.

Executive Function – “Executive functioning are the cognitive abilities needed to control our thoughts, emotions, and actions.”⁷ These thinking skills are a strong predictor of school readiness, academic achievement, and social behaviors.⁸

Ingenium’s Strong Character model aligns with the science and leading practices of non-cognitive skills, social-emotional learning, and executive function.

⁴ James J. Heckman and Tim Kautz, “Fostering and measuring skills: Interventions that improve character and cognition,” National Bureau of Economic Research, no. w19656 (2013).

⁵ Lex Borghans, Angela Lee Duckworth, James J. Heckman, and Bas Ter Weel, “The economics and psychology of personality traits,” *Journal of Human Resources* 43, no. 4 (2008): 972–1059.

⁶ Rebecca D. Taylor, Eva Oberle, Joseph A. Durlak, and Roger P. Weissberg, “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects,” *Child Development* 88, no. 4 (2017): 1156–71.

⁷ Joan P. Pozuelos, Pedro M. Paz-Alonso, Alejandro Castillo et al., “Development of attention networks and their interactions in childhood,” *Developmental Psychology* 50, no. 10 (2014): 2405.

⁸ Claire E. Cameron, Laura L. Brock, William M. Murrah et al., “Fine motor skills and executive function both contribute to kindergarten achievement,” *Child Development* 83, 4 (2012): 1229–44.

Ingenium's Three Keys to Strong Character



Positive Mindset – Having a positive mindset is defined as looking for the good in people and situations. Kids change their attitude and become open to learning in school. They set goals for themselves, some for the first time. They switch from an “I can’t” attitude and start looking for how they can do better and solve their own problems. A positive mindset guides kids to the healthy emotions they need.

Healthy Emotions – Having healthy emotions is defined as controlling your feelings in positive ways. Coaching kids to stop and think before they respond to negative emotions helps them develop emotional control skills. They begin to practice thankfulness and to express themselves in respectful ways. They make better choices.

Successful Behaviors – Successful behaviors are defined as having good actions and conduct. Coaching kids to plan ways to improve their behaviors and set priorities helps kids to reach their goals. They learn to take responsibility for their actions and to ask for help when needed. They get along better with others.

⁹ Merriam-Webster's Advanced Learner's English Dictionary, s.v. “character.”

Coaching Strong Character Beliefs

Many kids identify themselves by their weaknesses and mistakes instead of by their achievements. They lack confidence, or self-efficacy, which is a person’s belief in their ability to get things done. “Self-efficacy determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. People with high self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided.”¹⁰ They quickly recover from failures or setbacks. A student’s sense of self-efficacy influences their academic motivation, learning, and achievement.¹¹

Positive self-talk is an important skill that enables kids to believe in their abilities to succeed. Kids who practice positive self-talk learn how to encourage themselves. They increase their commitment and effort. Coaching kids to practice positive self-talk helps them to achieve their goals and gain self-confidence. They develop a strong character and have a positive view of their future.

Coaching kids to say these three positive self-talk statements helps them to feel confident. On the right are ways parents and other adults can help children build self-confidence.

I HAVE talents and abilities to succeed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Remind a child that they have talents and abilities and are able to set goals that will help them succeed.<input type="checkbox"/> Focus on a child’s strengths. Say, “You have the ability to get better grades when you ask for help and study more.”
I WILL work hard and improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Encourage a child to set a specific personal improvement goal.<input type="checkbox"/> Reassure a child that making mistakes is OK and a part of learning and improving.
I SEE myself reaching my goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Remind a child not to say negative words—“I can’t,” or “I’m stupid,” or “I quit”—when something is hard. Coach a child to use positive self-talk and to keep practicing.<input type="checkbox"/> Help a child to see themselves reaching their goals and having many successes in life.

¹⁰ Albert Bandura, “Self-Efficacy,” in V. S. Ramachaudran, ed., *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, vol. 4 (New York: New York Academic Press, 1994), 71–81.

¹¹ Natalie Haskell, quoting American Society of Horticultural Science, in “Classroom strategies to improve student self-efficacy and learning outcomes,” July 28, 2016, Pearson, <https://www.pearsoned.com/improve-self-efficacy-learning-outcomes/>.

Ingenium's CARE Coaching

Children who have been coached to develop healthy emotions achieve more academically, have fewer behavioral problems, are more emotionally stable and resilient, and are buffered from the damaging effects of family breakup, according to longitudinal research studies.¹²

Kids are more likely to reach their full potential when they have positive relationships—in school and at home. With Ingenium's CARE Coaching and its easy-to-follow format, parents and adults who work with children learn to guide kids to make better choices instead of just telling them what to do. Kids set their own goals, learn from their mistakes, and take responsibility for their actions. They develop the character skills they need to have a bright future. Using CARE Coaching, parents and adults who work with kids learn how to . . .

Connect with kids to improve their attitude.

Ask open-ended questions that help kids learn to problem solve.

Reinforce kids' choice of goals.

Encourage kids by telling them, "I know you can succeed."

Goal Setting

An important foundation in developing strong character is goal setting. Goals help kids to get things done and not give up. When kids are coached to set their own goals and to plan the action steps to reach each goal, they are more likely to stay focused and keep working. Reaching goals replaces negative habits with positive behaviors that students practice on their own. With each success, kids gain confidence. They begin the process of seeing a positive future for themselves through goal achievement. They practice this three-step thinking process:

Vision: I see myself reaching my goals.

Aim: I will focus on what I need to do to improve.

Plan: I will create action steps to reach each goal.

¹² Lynn Fainsilber Katz, John M. Gottman, and Carole Hooven, "Meta-emotion philosophy and family functioning: Reply to Cowan (1996) and Eisenberg (1996)," *Journal of Family Psychology* 10, no. 3 (1996): 284.

Goal-Setting Tools

CARE coaching focuses on self-management and self-regulation. It gives adolescents tools to set goals, track their progress, and change their behavior. It targets one or two problem behaviors at a time. Good habits are formed through repetition of a skill. These resources are grounded in the principles of behavior-change research to promote goal setting and action planning for kids' success.¹³

Goal Menu: Helps kids to choose positive options and realistic goals. The goal menu lists behaviors that can be easily tracked with numbers to show improvements.

I will follow all the rules at school 3 out of 5 times a day.	I will follow all the rules at home 3 out of 5 times a day.	I will walk away from a fight or argument 3 out of 5 times a week.	When I am arguing with someone, I won't use cuss words more than 2 times a week.
I will attend all my classes 3 out of 5 days a week.	I will not interrupt others while they're talking more than once a day.	I will complete all of my assignments 3 out of 5 days a week.	I will not get more than 2 tardies per week.
I will study at least 20 minutes each day.	I will respectfully follow directions at school 3 out of 5 days a week.	I will ask for help in class 3 out of 5 days each week.	I will control my anger 3 out of 5 times.

Confidence Scale: Guides parents and others in determining an appropriate goal for a child. On a scale from 1 to 10, kids indicate how confident they feel about being able to reach the goal they set. This measures a child's mindset and feelings about a specific goal. Successful achievement of even small goals increases positive behavior and confidence for larger goals.



Goal Achievement Worksheet: Supports kids as they work to reach a goal by displaying their performance each week in an easy-to-use chart. The worksheet guides kids to list their goal, their current behavior, and behaviors that are worse and better than the goal. Kids record their progress each week, working with a parent or coach.

GOAL BEHAVIOR		1	2	3	4
😊 Much better than goal					
🙂 Better than goal					
😊 GOAL					
😞 Current behavior					
😞 Worse behavior					

¹³ Damara Gutnick, Kathy Reims, Connie Davis et al., "Brief action planning to facilitate behavior change and support patient self-management," *Journal of Science Communication* 21, no. 1 (2014): 17–29.

Ingenium’s Resources

Ingenium’s character-coaching training utilizes technology to improve the skills of today’s children. A report from SCOPE “finds that technology—when implemented properly—can produce significant gains in student achievement and boost engagement, particularly among students most at-risk.”¹⁵

The Strong Character skills training program for kids guides elementary- and middle-school students in developing strong character, goal-setting, and building better relationships by using successful behaviors.

CARE Coaching for parents is an easy-to-use training model. It provides tools parents can use to coach their kids in setting goals and developing the skills that lead to strong character.

The Strong Character skills training and CARE Coaching model is also available for teachers and other adults and organizations that work with children and families.

These programs can be integrated into existing programs and services or used as a series of character-building workshops.

Ingenium, funded in part by United Way, provides the Strong Character training program throughout Kent County—to students, parents, and adults who work with kids.

Schools, family organizations, and others interested in obtaining Ingenium’s Strong Character resources to help kids can request more information and resources by contacting Ingenium at info@ingeniumcoach.org.



¹⁵ Damara Gutnick, Kathy Reims, Connie Davis et al., “Brief action planning to facilitate behavior change and support patient self-management,” *Journal of Science Communication* 21, no. 1 (2014): 17–29.

Conclusion

Early adolescence is a difficult time for kids as they enter puberty, with its physical, emotional, and behavioral changes, and transition into middle school without the strong character skills they need to succeed.

Research has proven that character skills are just as important, if not more important, than IQ in determining academic and employment outcomes.

Strong character skills are critical for kids' well-being and to build a foundation for their social-emotional learning. These skills prepare kids for successful academic development.

Ingenium's Strong Character skills training initiative answers this challenge by offering a solution that builds on the science underlying how one thinks, feels, and behaves. It conveys the information to kids in a manner that can be easily taught, using the principles of coaching. Resources, in print and online, have been developed for students, parents, and adults who work with kids.

All children deserve the opportunity to learn the strong character skills they need to succeed and become contributing and engaged citizens.



About Us

Ingenium, originally named School-to-Career Progressions, was started in 2000 by Cascade Engineering as a derivative of its successful Welfare-to-Career program.¹⁴ That program has guided some 800 individuals off welfare into meaningful careers. Its success has been recognized and replicated across the nation. Both programs are the vision of Fred Keller, founder and chairman of Cascade Engineering in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The focus at Ingenium (Latin for “character”) is to help kids stay in school, graduate from high school, and enroll in college or join the workforce with a job that offers opportunity for advancement.

The Strong Character curriculum, used originally in several Kent County school districts, was developed from the experiences of individuals who had overcome personal adversity and is in line with evidence-based leading practices.

In 2007, the Strong Character skills program was expanded to include a Diversion Program for first-time offenders in the Kent County justice system, which operated in collaboration with local mental health organizations. The program teaches Strong Character skills that equip kids with the tools to achieve long-term success. According to a Kent County Family Division judge, of the roughly 500 students who had successfully completed this program at the time, nearly 90 percent were not referred again to the court by police within the first year following completion.

Ingenium’s Strong Character program continues to expand, with online courses added to the printed workbooks developed for students, parents, and adults who work with kids. Funded in part by Heart of West Michigan United Way, resources are offered to benefit all families in Kent County through schools, organizations that work with children, and directly to students and parents.



¹⁴ Lynn Golodner, “Welfare to Career: Plastics Company Helps People Break Barriers to Success,” *Corp* magazine (December 23, 2015), <https://www.corpmagazine.com/welfare-career-plastics-company-helps-people-break-barriers-success/>.

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