
Statement on Youth Social Action and Character Development

‘Through a dedication to social action the character of young people and the communities they live in can be transformed.’

Youth social action is an effective and meaningful way to develop young people’s character virtues.

Youth social action is practical action in the service of others to create positive change. It provides an important mechanism for young people to develop and express their character while benefiting others. It incorporates a range of activities – including volunteering for a charity, caring for someone in their community, providing peer support online, campaigning or fundraising for a specific cause – and can take place in both formal and informal settings. Social action should be challenging, youth-led (although often adult facilitated), socially impactful, progressive, embedded, and reflective. Young people’s social action should not start from a deficit model: many young people are already active and engaged, and many more would be engaged if appropriate support and guidance were in place. Social action, therefore, should be celebrated for its **transformational** possibilities – both for young people and their communities – and should be acknowledged as a right of every young person.

Government, youth agencies, youth workers, charities, businesses, healthcare settings, religious institutions, parents, schools, colleges and universities have an obligation to work with all young people – irrespective of background or need – to provide opportunities and support for social action. This should be in a way that recognises young people’s agency in developing their patterns and forms of social action as well as their motivation to meet the needs of others rather than obtaining only personal gain. Youth social action relates fundamentally to character, which we define as a set of personal traits that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct, as well as to character education – an umbrella term for all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop personal strengths called virtues. Character development – and the importance of virtue – should be viewed as a core element of social action, **empowering all young people** to develop a clearer sense of their relationships with others, as well as of their own purpose in life. Indeed, **a sense of purpose** – one that is discovered and not imposed – represents a striking outcome of young people’s social action and ensures that young people are, and remain, connected with their communities.

Social action provides a **double benefit**. It develops a range of capacities in young people, while simultaneously building and enhancing the communities with which young people engage. The process is one through which young people connect with issues they feel passionately about and which affect others, bringing people from different backgrounds and communities together. In planning to have a positive impact on others and taking action, young people work collaboratively to make an important contribution to society while at the same time building their own self-worth and sense of belonging – capacities essential to human and societal flourishing. This double benefit is central to character development. The relationship between social action and character development has a strong conceptual basis, one which is rooted across the following virtue types:

Performance character virtues

such as resilience, determination and teamwork.

Civic character virtues

such as service, citizenship and volunteering.

Moral character virtues

such as honesty, trust and compassion.

Intellectual character virtues

such as curiosity, critical thinking and open-mindedness.

In combination, these virtues are part of our character strengths and are constitutive of, as well as conducive to, a **life of flourishing**. As such, they enable young people to develop “good sense” – the transferable ability to know what to and what not to do, for the right reasons, in a variety of situations and contexts.

It is through particular *processes* of social action, rather than simply through the activity itself, that character development happens best. Social action that enables young people to develop and express their character will recognise the importance of planning as well as the action itself, but will also place a high regard on the benefits of **reflection**.

True reflection requires young people to think deeply about various aspects of their social action – including times when difficulties have arisen or when the action has not met its intended outcomes. Structured reflection makes social action activities a ‘safe space to fail’, providing a means through which young people can explore their social action experiences. This can be achieved through conversations between peers, the young person and an adult supporting them, or the young person and a beneficiary of their social action.

Reflection in this intrinsic sense is essential in supporting young people to articulate and understand their own personal growth gained through social action and it requires a commitment to intrapersonal honesty. Reflection, therefore, necessarily demands that young people build a vocabulary that enables them to engage with the four types of virtue outlined above so that they are able to think carefully about their character development and articulate it to others – whether at school, on University application forms, in job applications or in the workplace. The ability to articulate can be a differentiating factor between young people, but an unfair one: some young people may be better at articulating their strengths, possibly because of good support from an adult or peer mentor, whereas others may be disadvantaged despite having similar strengths. The importance of supported reflection is therefore vital.

This virtue literacy also enables young people to form and exercise **practical wisdom** – which is a more comprehensive capability than decision-making. That they do so is crucial in helping young people to develop the good sense necessary for flourishing individuals and society. Many social action programmes build in appropriate stages for reflection to take place, but young people are often involved in a variety of formal and informal social action activities, and therefore also need to be encouraged to reflect on and value their social action journey holistically, from childhood into adulthood.

‘Some people believe that nature makes people good, others say that it is habit, and still others say that it is teaching. Experience shows that logical arguments and teaching are not effective in most cases. The soul of the student must first have been conditioned by good habits just as land must be cultivated to nurture seed.’

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

Social action that involves planning, action and reflection, and which builds in a focus on character development, has long-term benefits that extend beyond the present and particular, providing young people with transferable qualities relevant to a range of situations and contexts. As one young person involved in our consultation made clear, planning, engaging in and reflecting on action provided them not only with a sense of purpose but a **‘habit for life’**. This also reflects the #iwill campaign’s conceptualisation of social action, whereby it is best constituted by a series of actions – a journey – rather than solitary or individual acts. While some young people may necessarily start from single acts, the development of lifelong commitment is more likely to be the result of serial engagement.

It is through this dedication to social action that the character of young people and their communities they live in can be transformed.

Further Reading

This Statement builds upon the work that has already been and is being undertaken in this area by a number of organisations, including the Cabinet Office. Through Step Up To Serve, the Cabinet Office is currently measuring how some elements of character can be developed through social action. This includes the evaluation of the Youth Social Action trials, which will provide evidence on the link between participation in social action and the development of character and life skills. These results will be available in June 2015.

The following is a sample of published works on the subject of character that have informed this Statement. Though by no means an exhaustive list, these publications give a flavour of the kind of work that has already been done in this area.

The Young Foundation, ‘A framework of outcomes for young people’, July 2012 (www.youngfoundation.org/publications/framework-of-outcomes-for-young-people)

CBI, ‘First steps: a new approach for our schools’, November 2012 (www.cbi.org.uk/campaigns/education-campaign-ambition-for-all/first-steps-read-the-report-online)

IVR, Young Foundation, NCVO, Cabinet Office, ‘Scoping a quality framework for YSA: Campaign for Youth Social Action’, June 2013 (www.youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Scoping-a-Quality-Framework-for-Youth-Social-Action-FINAL.pdf)

Demos, ‘Service generation: a step change in youth social action’, November 2013 (www.demos.co.uk/publications/servicegeneration)

Character and resilience manifesto: APPG on social mobility with Centre Forum and Character Counts, February 2014 (www.centreforum.org/assets/pubs/character-and-resilience.pdf)

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, ‘A Framework for Character Education’, 2013 (<http://jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/other-centre-papers/Framework..pdf>)

This statement was developed through a consultation at St. George's House, Windsor, on the 29 and 30 September 2014 by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, Step Up To Serve, young people involved in social action and representatives from the following organisations:

Achievement for All 3 As

Cabinet Office

CBI

Center for Character and Social Responsibility,

Boston University

Character Scotland

City Year

Demos

Department for Education

Duke of Edinburgh's Award

Intermedia Social Innovation

National Youth Agency

NCS Trust

NCVO

PwC

Scout Association

Social Research Unit at Dartington

Spirit of 2012

University of South Australia

vInspired

Volunteer Now

Wellington College

YouthNet

For more information about the statement please contact

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues:

w: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

e: a.p.thompson@bham.ac.uk

t: 0121 4143602

Step up to Serve:

w: www.iwill.org.uk

e: hello@stepuptoserve.org.uk