

Raising Courageous Kids

Reading Group Guide for Teachers

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*In the End, we will remember not the words of
our enemies, but the silence of our friends.*

Martin Luther King Jr.

Introduction



The introduction, discussion questions, suggested reading list, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Charles A. Smith's *Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism*. Additional guides are available for parents, professionals, and other groups from the author's website at www.raisingcourageouskids.com.

This document is likely to be updated so check the version date at the bottom of the page.

Each participant in the reading group should have read Raising Courageous Kids. This guide is intended for informal use, possibly by one or more of the parents in the group. The discussion may occur at one session or over a series of meetings. In all cases, the discussion leader can choose which questions to emphasize for his or her group. Leaders are also encouraged to form their own questions that relate to the book.

For discussion

1. Have you asked your students what "courage" means? What do they think of this concept? How do you define *courage*?

During my elementary school storytelling concerts I often begin by asking children what "courage" means. The most common response is linked to not feeling afraid. Children view fear as bad and that fear cannot coexist with courage.

2. Why do you think children have negative view of fear? How would you respond to them when they claim that courage is the absence of fear?

When an idea is not understood, the most likely response is to define what it is not. The problem with this response is that it does not affirm what something is, just what it is not. Teachers can fill this blank with ideas that more clearly define what courage means.

3. Why is fear a valuable emotion? What function does it serve? How does fear contribute to courage?
4. In what ways do (or could) your students show courage? Can you make a list of what a new teacher might look for to assess courage in his or her students?

The lengthy list of Milestones in the book should be a great help in directing your attention to observable outcomes if your students are younger than 14 years of age.

5. Is courage innate or learned? Are courageous people born that way or is courage something they learned?
6. If courage is learned, what is your role as a teacher in contributing to this element of a child's education?
7. In "Children: Our Heart Work," the first chapter of *Raising Courageous Kids*, the author suggests four reasons that courage is a fundamental capacity. Do you agree with the reasons he gave and can you suggest any additional basis for the importance of courage?

This section originated in a discussion I had with a parent participating in a workshop on courage in San Antonio, Texas. Although she agreed that nurturing courage in children is important, she found the idea and its implications frightening. "You need to convince your reader that reading through the book is worth working through the fear about this issue," she told me. Most of the first chapter is my effort to respond to her challenge.

8. Make a case for bringing courage into the school curriculum. Why is this an important part of a child's education? How would courage fit into existing curriculum in your school?
9. The author suggests that courage is primarily a learned response that evolves over a series of eight steps that begin at infancy. At each step, children learn a skill that is fundamental to the development of courage. In the first chapter he emphasizes that these "steps" are more like movement in a dance instead of walking up stair steps. Does this kind of evolution make sense to you? Why would he want to emphasize this movement as more like a dance?
10. Examine each step and discuss the role of education in nurturing the skill learned at that step.

For example, willpower is the strength learned at the first step. How can teachers strengthen the capacity for willpower in children while maintaining important classroom limits?

11. At each step, there are consequences for the failure to learn the key skill. For example, is there a price at achieving total obedience of children at the cost of undermining their willpower? Can obedience and willpower coexist?

Look for this kind of tension between the skill and practical challenges at each of the eight steps.

12. Are courage and heroism the same thing? What does the author of *Raising Courageous Kids* think? Would you define them differently?
13. What images of heroism do children today experience? Are these images truly heroic? Is *admiration* and *heroism* the same thing?
14. What is *true heroism*? How do you recognize an action as being truly heroic? What elements have to be present in true heroism?
15. How do we help children and youth in schools understand the difference between admiration and heroism? What role do teachers have in bringing this knowledge to students?
16. Why do those who act with true courage and heroism feel uncomfortable with public attention afterwards?

You will find the answer primarily in the chapters on *Caring and Integrity*.

17. Read and discuss one of the *Mighty Hearts* examples with students older than 8 years of age. Was this *Mighty Heart* intelligent in his or her response?
18. We must combine vigilance with any discussion of courage. We should make sure children learn to be the best thinkers possible in difficult circumstances and control their emotional arousal sufficiently to think clearly and respond affirmatively.

Introduce the concept of the *Ring of Valor* with older children. Apply the *Ring* to a familiar experience, e.g., a bully that stops them on the way home and insists that they submit in some way.

19. The *Ring of Valor* consists of a sequence of seven events, starting with *opportunity* and *notice* and ending with taking *action*. Involve children in a discussion of how the *Ring* applies to the *Mighty Heart* story you selected.

The *Ring of Valor* serves as the basis for the “*Challenge to Valor*” card game created by the author. See www.raisingcourageouskids.com and click on “*Game*” for more information.

20. Visit the Carnegie Hero Commission website at:

<http://www.carnegiehero.org>

Conduct a search of medal recipients from your community/area/state. Discuss the results with older children, giving particular emphasis on the combination of *valor* with *vigilance* and *composure*.

21. Does a teacher today need to have the capacity for courage to teach? If so, in what situations does courage apply? Are there circumstances where teachers are heroic? Discuss your views with other teachers in your group.

For further reading

Kathleen Brehony, *Ordinary Grace: An Examination of the Roots of Compassion, Altruism, and Empathy, and the Ordinary Individuals Who Help Others in Extraordinary Ways* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999).

Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

John McCain, *Why Courage Matters: The Way to a Braver Life* (New York: Random House, 2004).

Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Charles A. Smith, *From Wonder to Wisdom: Using Stories to Help Children Grow* (New York: New American Library, 1989).

Charles A. Smith, *The Peaceful Classroom: 162 Easy Activities to Teach Preschoolers Compassion and Cooperation* (Mt. Rainier, MD: Gryphon House, 1993).

Author background

Charles A. Smith is a professor and extension specialist in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University. He is a former play therapist, medical social worker, preschool teacher, and child development center director. He is married and the father of two children. He began working on *Raising Courageous Kids* the day after the 9-11 tragedy to call attention to the heroism that day and better understand its origins and implications for children. *Raising Courageous Kids* is his fifth book, following *The Encyclopedia of parenting* (Greenwood Press), *The peaceful classroom: 162 easy activities to teach preschoolers compassion and cooperation* (Gryphon House), *From wonder to wisdom: Using stories to help children grow* (NAL/Penguin), and *Promoting the social development of young children* (Mayfield).

Please send your comments and suggestions for improving this guide to Charles A. Smith at casmith@ksu.edu.