

Character Counts Essay Contest 2026: “Respect”

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One thing you can't buy, but rather you have to earn, is something much more valuable than popularity and wealth: respect. Respect is more than just good manners; it's the act of treating others with dignity, fairness, and understanding. Such a characteristic is important to communities, as much as it is to me, because it fosters an ideal reality in which it validates our daily experiences while providing a secure foundation for mutual trust, resilience, and empathy to grow. Respect gives people a sense of worth and belonging. In understanding how respect has shaped, currently influences, and guides the future in communities, myself included, we can better understand its true power and meaning.

Historically, respect has played a powerful role in shaping communities at different levels including local, state, national, and the world itself. Take for example historical movements for civil rights. With lack of respect, conflict and inequity were the pattern in result. Civil rights movements demanded respect, dignity, and integrity for every single person. Following the United States Constitution's most important words, in my opinion, "We The People," activists and reformers moved for fairness, regardless of race, gender, or background. Local communities that executed and valued respect, were more likely to resolve conflicts peacefully and fairly, working together and supporting one another. At the state and national level, civil rights movements relied on the respect and treatment exchanged. To add, the national level of respect impacted the world. Therefore, at the world level, respect between nations established alliances and peace agreements and on the contrary, lack of respect led to wars and injustice. History shows that respect can unite people, while disrespect divides them.

Today, respect is just as important, especially as we now have the impact of social media. It is much easier to find ways to disrespect others, and in numerous and various different ways, visibly and importantly. For this reason, respect is just as important, if not more. Though, respect

is not only driven by social media, but rather all factors. Locally, respect is much more impactful at schools, within families, and neighborhoods. One thing all these environments have in common are their function with respect, kindness, and empathy. They all function accordingly with the environment. If respect is present, they run smoothly and healthy. If they express disrespect, they result in conflicts and problems. At state levels, respect affects the higher powers, such as leaders and the communication between leaders and citizens regarding laws and individual rights. Applying this to the national levels, laws and leadership depend on the respect shown and applied for citizens' rights. Worldly, respect for cultures and beliefs is what is prominent. In our present days, respect for culture, beliefs, and tradition is our "glue." Respect is what ties us all together and helps us resolve day-to-day issues, no matter the issue. As a result of lack of respect, conflicts go beyond and result in division. Due to disrespect on culture, beliefs, and traditions, conflicts often result in tension, high discrimination, but overall misunderstanding. Without respect, communication becomes harmful instead of helpful.

As for the future, it is more than likely that respect will play a much greater role than in the present. As time elapses, the world finds new ways to stay connected. Whether it's technological innovations, new and diverse populations, or global changes, the world is always going to require respect to function. Through local communities, respect will raise individuals who are compassionate, open-minded, and responsible and that is what the future needs. These communities will teach future generations to be stronger and united, together. The leaders that result from such communities will create new ways of fairness and cooperation. At the state levels, respect will do much more than just create politeness. If respect is transformed into a priority, states will become much more engaging and trustworthy. It would transform respect into a tool to resolve conflicts and to better themselves for their people. Speaking at the national

level, respect would continue to be necessary to prevent all sorts of conflicts. After all, being heard and understood is what many allies and nations want. As well as the world, with the impact of respect, if future generations find ways to prevent conflict and apply respect to them, societies can become much more inclusive and peaceful, becoming a much better place for the people. The future depends on how we choose to treat one another today.

In the environment I grew up in and applying respect to my life, results are much more impactful than I would have ever thought. Ever since I was young, I grew up in an environment where there was no respect whatsoever. With lack of respect, came abuse and verbal fights nearly every day. To be honest, if it wasn't for my father's absence, I don't know if I'd ever realize the power respect holds. My father was abusive and liked to be the dominant in our house, even though my mother was the one who worked to provide for all of us, including himself. Until my father left, my mother was the first person to teach me about respect. The most important thing I learned from her was to respect ourselves first. To look out for ourselves and make sure we do whatever we have to do to be safe. She would always tell us to be different from her. To walk away from toxic situations where your health and environment are at risk. This is exactly what life has taught me and it is what I'll always continue to do: respect myself, my friends, my family, and those in my environment. We never know what people are going through and making them feel seen and heard is an essential key to living life. Respect can protect people just as much as it can connect them.

As I mentioned, growing up there was a lack of respect, but in my present, I'm glad to say it's here. As I live day to day, my friendships, relationships, and successes have a foundation of respect. I have had long-life relationships with people who I respect and they respect me back. Respect has taught me about patience, empathy, and diversity. It has taught me that everyone's

different, but everyone deserves to be treated fairly. I may not have grown up with respect, but I will apply it to my life in the future. I must say respect is what has opened so many doors for me, including college. I know that based on my economic status, college would never be an option for me. I feel that based on respect, you all and our school grant us the ability to apply to this scholarship. You guys give us an opportunity at life, to be greater individuals. This scholarship would not only support my education, but it would also allow me to continue becoming someone who leads with respect and gives back to my community. In my future, growing, I'll be able to continue showing the importance of respect and displaying it to everyone around me. In doing this, I know I can create a change in my community for the better. By leading with respect, I hope to inspire others to do the same.

To conclude, respect was, is, and will always be important. It is the key to keeping our world together. It is what makes us feel seen and understood. Again, respect is more than just manners; it is a way of living, shaping individuals like myself and societies. Respect has the power to heal, unite, and transform the world around us.