

LEADER'S GUIDE



**LIFE STEPS**  
with Michael Pritchard

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**Program #8**

**Building Character**

## **Series Overview**

*LifeSteps* is a 12-part series designed to help students build character and develop the social and emotional skills they need to become responsible, caring, and successful adults. With well-developed social and emotional skills, young people will be more aware of their feelings and more capable of managing them. They will be better able to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and relate to other people effectively. In school, these skills can increase motivation, lessen anxiety, improve study skills and boost academic achievement.

*LifeSteps* uses lively, unrehearsed student-centered discussion, dramatized dilemmas that accurately reflect teen experience, and themed comic interludes that deliver their message through humor. Filmed with actual students in schools across the country, each program is culturally sensitive and multiethnic. The series covers a broad range of skills and attributes: self-knowledge, self-control, resiliency, empathy, problem solving, developing interpersonal relationships, building character, respect, responsibility, and working towards success. Each of these skills and attributes is an important component of social and emotional intelligence.

The underlying structure of the *LifeSteps* curriculum is an eight-step problem-solving strategy. Explored in depth in Program #6, *Creative Problem Solving*, this strategy is demonstrated in each program and provides students with a flexible, practical approach to managing the social and emotional challenges they face every day. The eight steps are:

- 1. Stop and calm down**
- 2. Name the problem**
- 3. Understand others**
- 4. Brainstorm solutions**
- 5. Evaluate and choose**
- 6. Make a plan**
- 7. Reflect and adjust**
- 8. Reward yourself**

Although each program has unique objectives, they all share the goal of providing students with the above important life skills. The *LifeSteps* approach can help teens think through difficult situations and make good choices, during a stage in their development when they are driven by strong emotions.

## **How to Use This Program**

This program is designed for use in classrooms, community centers, youth organizations, camps, teen groups, libraries, or for children at home. Although teens are the target audience, parents, teachers, school administrators, school support staff, counselors, social workers, youth workers, peer counseling trainers, mentors, and anyone else who has regular contact with, and a commitment to, young people can benefit from the program. This Leader's Guide is aimed at teachers, but it can be used by any group leader who wants to get the most out of *Building Character*.

As with the other programs in the *LifeSteps* series, *Building Character* is intended for use as part of a learning experience that begins before viewing the program and ends beyond the classroom walls. The discussion questions and activities are intended to focus and enhance this learning experience.

Before showing *Building Character* to your students, you may find these steps helpful:

- Screen the program at least once, noting areas where you may want to stop the tape to focus on a particular issue.
- Read this guide through to get a sense of how you can use the program, what discussion questions would work best, and what follow-up activities would be most productive.
- Ask the students questions to get them thinking about some of the key issues presented in this program. You might want to distribute copies of the discussion questions on pages 6 and 7. Be sure to review the questions in advance to make sure they are clear to you and appropriate for your students. You can then use them to encourage discussion after the screening.

Peer education, rather than frontal teaching, is the technique that underlies the entire *LifeSteps* series. Because we believe that teen viewers will more easily learn the skills and attitudinal changes proposed if they are taught by their peers, the programs are structured around discussions where real teens grapple with tough situations and model positive solutions.

## **Objectives**

- To explore the relationship between values, character, and behavior
- To make decisions consistent with teens' positive personal values
- To understand the concept and importance of moral conscience
- To strengthen resistance to negative peer pressure
- To understand the value of will power and external support in maintaining good character

## **Synopsis**

Michael opens the program onstage, with amusing stories which emphasize that making healthy choices is what good character is all about.

Michael asks the teens what character is. "Knowing what's right and wrong," "Not how to act in public, but how you truly are," and "It has to do with morals," are some answers. "And where did you learn your morals?" asks Michael. "From my parents— education, caring about others, treating others the way you want to be treated, honesty," one girl answers. A boy offers that character is the application of those values and morals to your life—the ability to say "No, I'm not going to do that," instead of "I shouldn't have done that."

Michael asks if anyone knows somebody who has good character. One girl says her parents always stand up for what they believe in, which gives her someone to look up to.

"Do we learn by watching what others go through?" Michael asks. A girl says that we learn from people with good character and from people with no character. A boy adds that a person's true character is not only the ability to learn from people, but also to stand your ground. Another boy says that how we make decisions depends on what we think is right and wrong. "If you know there's going to be drinking or vandalism at a party, you try to stay away." Michael asks him, "Aren't teenagers facing these decisions every day?" "Well, every weekend," the boy jokes.

Michael asks if there was a time anyone had to rely on character, and a girl shares that people used to make fun of her because of a skin disease. This teasing taught her that you should always like yourself, and that when people made fun of her, it said more about them than about her.

"Have you ever been in a crowd that was getting out of hand?" Michael asks. A boy tells about friends that were into alcohol and drugs. He eventually turned to alcohol, which changed him; he "spiraled down and got really depressed." He later told his mother he had tried to kill himself. "If my mom hadn't talked to me, I'd probably be dead today." "When did you realize that there had to be a better way?" Michael asks him. "Talking to my mom...it showed me that she loved me...I learned to love the inside of myself, instead of...having friends who liked me because I could drink so much."

Onstage, Michael tells the audience that character is about courage and knowing who you are. He shares a story that shows it takes courage to stand up for yourself.

In the first dramatized segment, Michelle talks about her friends partying—there's been a lot of drinking. At first, it was fun, but now it's getting out of hand. One night, Michelle isn't drinking and everyone else is. Her best friend Cheryl wants Michelle to take Cheryl's parents' car to pick up some food, since Michelle is the only one who is sober. Cheryl gives Michelle her parents' car keys and \$40 she has taken from her sister's drawer. Michelle doesn't want to go, but feels that if she doesn't, someone else will; they're all really drunk and someone could get hurt.

Michael asks the group what they think Michelle is feeling. A girl says she has to make a choice: to either drive the car or risk someone else driving drunk. The group says Michelle's friends are pressuring her, and one girl adds that she doesn't have much choice but to go. Another girl adds "if she does do this for them, she is helping her friends be self-destructive." Michael asks why it is important to pay attention when your conscience is bothering you. A girl answers that if you don't, your actions will plague you, and a boy states that you don't just wake up with good character, you go through trials. "Is this how we learn what's right and wrong? Michael says, and then asks what the teens would do. One girl says that she would go to the store, because she'd hate to see her friends get hurt. "You can't live with your friends getting hurt," a boy agrees.

"If it comes to them getting into trouble," another boy says, "I'm not sure I would just

jump in the way, but if it's about trying to save friends, that's more important than anything else." One girl says that she would risk getting in trouble to prevent someone dying, but another believes that you have to be true to yourself. "How about taking the car?" Michael asks. A boy says that "you're stealing it." Michael takes it further, "And what about the \$40?" The group says that Michelle shouldn't take it because it's stolen money. Another boy adds that after weighing the repercussions, he doesn't know anymore; there are too many situations that could happen. "You could get hurt; your friends could get hurt—it's endless."

"So," Michael says, "if you're in a situation with no good choices, what does it say about the situation?" A boy replies that you should avoid it in the first place, so you won't have to do something bad to do the right thing.

Onstage, Michael says he likes to tell people that the real definition of the word 'insanity' is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. He explains that one of the hardest things is to know when it is time to make a change...to admit that things are not working and summon the courage to make tough choices.

Michael introduces the next dramatized segment. Michelle's friends are still partying, though she's stopped drinking entirely. A few times, she's woken up and not remembered a lot of what had happened the night before—that really scared her. Her friends think she's weird for not drinking and Cheryl doesn't understand her, though she is still pressuring her to come to another party. Michelle is considering going, hoping that Cheryl won't drink so much this time.

A girl in the group says you can't go by "maybes"—Michelle is making excuses to go to the party. The group agrees with Michael that this is a big moment for Michelle. She has to decide which is more important to her—her values or her friends. In response to Michael's question, a boy says she shouldn't be friends with them even if that would be hard.

Another tells about when he was in the 8th grade and started hanging out with people who were getting into drugs and alcohol, which he didn't really want to do. Asked why, he answers that when he was 8 years old, he promised his godfather that he wouldn't smoke or take drugs. Every time he thinks about drugs, that promise pops up in his mind. Even though his godfather wouldn't find out, he doesn't want to let him down. The boy adds that you can always find a new friend who doesn't want to do those things.

A girl shares that she used to be friends with everybody, but this year, she changed. "When you're in a crowd of people who aren't really focused on the things you need to focus on, it brings you down...I'm a junior now and need to be really focused on school." "Was it scary to leave your friends?" Michael asks. "At first," she answers, "but then I got closer to the people who stuck by me." Another girl adds that her own priorities were messed up, but when she watched what the first girl did, she realized that it was easy to flip around her priorities. She learned that when you have a sense of self, the friendships that do count stay with you.

In the third dramatization, Michelle has stopped seeing her friends and is trying to

make new ones—though it isn't happening as easily as she'd like. Sometimes she's lonely and finds herself wanting to drink again. When she bumps into Cheryl, who acts like her old self and invites Michelle to a party saying, "You don't have to drink; we understand," Michelle considers going. Michael asks the group what they think is happening. Answers include that "Michelle is scared that she hasn't found new friends," "She's been down that road before," and "If she's at the party, she'll drink again." "So she shouldn't go?" Michael concludes. The group agrees that if she went, it would be the same story all over again.

Michael asks the group what Michelle might do to feel better about herself during this transition. Suggestions include "find out what she's good at..." to "widen her horizons," and "help her meet new people." Some of the group emphasizes the importance of being able to go to someone for support and the need to stand strong against pressure from friends to do something you don't want to do. "What did you learn by being strong?" Michael asks one boy, who replies that it made him feel great, "...that I can do what I put my mind to." Michael emphasizes the importance of standing up for yourself, adding that "when you do that you stand up for others too."

Onstage, Michael concludes by saying our values point the way, but our character gets us there.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In this program, a teen defines having character as saying "I'm not going to do that," rather than "I shouldn't have done that." Have you ever been in a situation where you acted in a particular way and regretted it later? Describe what happened and how you felt.
2. Who do you look to for support when you have to make a difficult moral decision? Why is this person helpful?
3. Michael asks the group why it is important to pay attention to their conscience. What can happen if you ignore your conscience?
4. Think of a person whose character you admire. What qualities define that person's character?
5. Peer groups can be both a positive and a negative influence. How does your peer group influence you?
6. Do you think being "friends to the end" is a reasonable approach to friendship? Under what circumstances might you choose to end a friendship?
7. What is the relationship between good character and courage?
8. After a period of separation, Michelle's friends invite her to party with them again. What do you think she should do, and why?

9. How have your experiences in life helped to shape your character?

10. A girl in the audience describes leaving her friends behind as she reassessed her priorities; another girl shares the impact of seeing that happen. Have you ever watched people take charge and change their behavior? How did it affect you?

### **Activities**

1. Choose a historical figure whose character has affected world events, whether positively or negatively. Write a brief essay describing the impact this person has had on humanity. How would the world have been different if this person had not existed?

2. In small groups, write a dialogue that depicts Cheryl trying to convince Michelle to rejoin their crowd. After each group has presented its dialogue to the larger group, hold a class-wide discussion of the most effective techniques Michelle used to withstand Cheryl's pressure.

3. Attorneys often use character witnesses to give testimony about the moral reputation of a person on trial. Invite a local attorney to speak to your group about the effect character can have on the outcome of trials.

4. Many teens in this program share that the emotional support of their parents was very important to their moral growth. Think of an adult who has helped you develop your character. Write a thank-you letter to that person, telling how he or she has helped to shape you.

5. In the story of Pinocchio, Jiminy Cricket tells Pinocchio to "always let your conscience be your guide." Working with a school or community group, organize a contest inviting students to submit posters that portray Jiminy's lesson. Display the winning posters in a place visible in your community.



### **About Michael Pritchard**

Youth educator, humorist, actor, former probation officer, and PBS host, Michael Pritchard is known across the United States for his ability to help young people gain self-awareness. He has a unique ability to get teens to listen and open up, and uses his distinctive style of humor to share serious messages with his audience— messages about making good choices, personal responsibility, and respect for others.

Michael's award-winning series include: *SOS: Saving Our Schools*; *PeaceTalks*; *You Can Choose*; *The Power of Choice*; and *Big Changes, Big Choices*. A nationally acclaimed motivational speaker, Michael serves on the boards of directors for The Guardsmen, The Giants Community Fund, the Special Olympics, the California Association of Peer Programs, the Chinese-American Educational Institute, Ronald McDonald House, and the Salvation Army.





### **Program Titles**

- Program #1 The ABCs of Emotional Intelligence
- Program #2 Knowing Who You Are
- Program #3 Taking Charge
- Program #4 Bouncing Back
- Program #5 Empathy, Caring and Compassion
- Program #6 Creative Problem Solving
- Program #7 Getting Along with Others
- Program #8 Building Character
- Program #9 Respect
- Program #10 Responsibility
- Program #11 Developing Healthy Relationships
- Program #12 Doing Your Best

*Each program is approximately 30 minutes long.*

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