

# Building Character from the Start:

# 201 Activities

to foster **creativity,** **literacy,**

and **play** in **K-3**

**Susan Ragsdale and Ann Saylor**

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## Building Character from the Start: 201 Activities to Foster Creativity, Literacy, and Play in K-3.

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## DEDICATION

To kids everywhere, may you develop a lifelong passion and love for play, creativity, fantasy, and exploring imaginary worlds.

To Pete, the “big kid” in my life, thanks for filling my life with laughter, play, and ongoing antics that keep me on my toes. —*Susan*

To my three children—Daniel (7), Brendan (4), and Anna Kate (2)—who continually inspire the creative spirit within me.

To my loving husband, who lets me be my crazy, creative self and pursue my sometimes crazy dreams! —*Ann*

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## INTRODUCTION

**C**reativity is our entryway to other worlds. It can take us to amazing places where we can fly atop dragons, converse with talking frogs, meet and befriend new races (of plants, dinosaurs, giants, mice, unicorns, wizards, and so many more), or even picnic with the King of Ants in a celebratory truce of battles.

Once we open the doors to imagination, our minds become like portals. We never know where we'll find ourselves—in the middle of a battlefield with spoon in hand trying to save a gang of flying squirrels? Flying through the house, cape flapping behind as we seek to banish the monster that comes out at night and disturbs our sleep? Or sitting at the feet of a wise, tattered rabbit, listening intently as she recounts how one becomes real to a bunch of eager toys? The possibilities are endless.

Color, art, imagery—each has its special way of taking us to the kaleidoscopic inner world of creativity where we can roam, explore, discover, and be transformed by what we encounter. With art, we are invited to share with the world what we see with the eyes of the artist inside us. One person's folded-up piece of paper is another person's hair bow, another one's mustache, and yet another's butterfly. A simple cloud or moon in the eyes of an adult may for a cloud-gazing child be an elephant tromping through a field of grass, or for a stargazer, a wolf chasing the boy in the moon.

It's all in the eyes and the world of the beholder.

With the art of books, we encounter authors who transport us into worlds of the mind and imagination. They gather us in and involve us in the story from the onset. Is there a battle between good and evil? Is someone in trouble and only we can help? When books come alive, we enter into their stories to explore our own values, cheer on our heroes, defeat the villains, discover hidden meanings for ourselves, and learn the world's lessons and truths. When we enter into stories, we become part of the stories, and truth be told, they may very well become part of us.

Then, when we leave their worlds (and alas, we must return to our own!), we bring with us something more, something satisfying and fulfilling that is always ours to treasure and hold. Perhaps it's a nugget of truth or self-discovery, or maybe it's a sense of value or a lesson in character that sticks with us. Or maybe, just maybe, it's a lifelong friendship with reading that we keep forever.

In that outer world, we find that creativity and self-discovery can and do occur in the hands and at the direction of children in the midst of play. We cannot always have our noses in books or hands in paint! We must sometimes come up for air—get up, move, interact, socialize, energize, de-stress, make friends, laugh, and share. And what better way than through play—to actively engage with others and learn life's lessons through games?

Play is at the very heart of how children learn and interact with the world around

them. Playing make-believe, for example, that “free-for-all” kind of play in which children create their own scenarios, weave their own stories, and determine their own dialogue and outcomes, is an opportunity for children to improvise and develop skills, both cognitive and social, that expand their capacity for thinking and learning as well as for creativity and imagination.

Within the pages of this book are art pieces to finish, books to read, and activities to do that let children explore more fully the fantastic dimensions of creativity, stories, and play. These activities can be used to help children tap the fertile imagination within, cultivate inner creativity and self-expression, discover and build character, and, hopefully, find a lifelong love for creating, drawing, reading, writing, and playing. Children can finish the picture as they see fit, bring books to life through conversations and activities that add depth to the written word, and play games that stimulate their minds, engage their restless bodies, and inspire their unhindered spirits. The units of this book follow that format: finish pictures, bring books to life, and play. Unit One focuses on art and creating “masterpieces.” Along with these masterpieces are age-appropriate questions to engage children in conversations about their artwork and their lives. Unit Two seeks to build literacy skills through reading and writing. It too provides a venue for children and adults to converse, dream, and play together. Unit Three ensures that we meet the need children have to move and express themselves

through physical activity by focusing on the power of play. Again, the games found here include age-appropriate conversation starters to help children explore what they are learning and discovering during their time at play.

The tools of imagination that this book highlights—creativity, literacy, and play—are important for helping us identify the strengths and interests of the children around us. As you go through the activities in this book, watch and learn. What makes children respond and come alive? Does art or story or play bring out a spirit of enthusiasm? Do any of these things energize a particular child or group of children? Watch for the stories, games, or art pieces that children want to return to again and again. Note their preferences. Note how they act and what they say about themselves in response to what is going on. Then build on the strengths and interests you’ve identified to provide further opportunities for stimulation and growth.

The pages of this book were crafted with one ear tuned in to the world of imagination and one eye turned toward what research tells us is vital for children to be vibrant, strong, and true. Used intentionally, the tools of imagination can help mold and shape the character and inner strengths of young children. Character-building moments are woven throughout every page in this book in both subtle and direct ways. As children finish the pictures, they must find within themselves the things they value and put to paper how they see the world. The picture becomes complete as you chat with children

about their creation and ask questions to help them think through their take on the world. The act of creating itself builds character as children practice something they love (or for some, gain a new skill and practice getting better at something they may not excel at) and gain confidence in self-expression. In addition, children have multiple opportunities to clarify and talk about values and character through the various stories, activities, and games they experience. Questions and opportunities to share are included after each as a guide, so you can help children make the connection between what they just participated in and life itself. Those conversations will be chock-full of character-building moments because the questions were intentionally crafted with the 40 Developmental Assets in mind. And wherever you find assets, you will find character.

At the end of this book on page 149 is a list of Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for children, a research-based list of factors needed in all children's lives to help them thrive, a must-have for helping children become who they're meant to be. Put

to use, the asset framework can become a part of what you do with children every day, too. (For more ideas on how you can include the assets in your work with children, go to [search-institute.org](http://search-institute.org) and [theassetedge.net](http://theassetedge.net).) The Developmental Assets framework connects those fantastic inner-fantasy worlds explored inside this book with healthy doses of positive youth development.

Every activity denotes the asset(s) to which it relates, thus connecting creative sparks with developmental sparks. As you go through these pages, all the dots will be connected. You will see how art, books, and play lend themselves to building assets and character (for values *are* a part of the assets children need, and when children have caring adults and opportunities to express themselves and explore, character-clarifying moments naturally tend to happen) as well as creativity and self-expression within children. In short, this book is all about teachable moments. You can use each moment of each activity to pass on lessons that will last a lifetime: lessons of love, lessons of life, and lessons of character—right from the start.

# THE FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS FOR CHILDREN GRADES K-3 (AGES 5-9)

## EXTERNAL ASSETS

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### Support

1. *Family Support*—Family continues to be a consistent provider of love and support for the child’s unique physical and emotional needs.
2. *Positive Family Communication*—Parent(s) and child communicate openly, respectfully, and frequently, with child receiving praise for her or his efforts and accomplishments.
3. *Other Adult Relationships*—Child receives support from adults other than her or his parent(s), with the child sometimes experiencing relationships with a nonparent adult.
4. *Caring Neighborhood*—Parent(s) and child experience friendly neighbors who affirm and support the child’s growth and sense of belonging.
5. *Caring School Climate*—Child experiences warm, welcoming relationships with teachers, caregivers, and peers at school.
6. *Parent Involvement in Schooling*—Parent(s) talk about the importance of education and are actively involved in the child’s school success.

### Empowerment

7. *Community Values Children*—Children are welcomed and included throughout community life.
8. *Children as Resources*—Child contributes to family decisions and has opportunities to participate in positive community events.
9. *Service to Others*—Child has opportunities to serve in the community with adult support and approval.
10. *Safety*—Parents and community adults ensure the child’s safety while keeping in mind her or his increasing independence.

### Boundaries and Expectations

11. *Family Boundaries*—The family maintains supervision of the child, has reasonable guidelines for behavior, and always knows where the child is.
12. *School Boundaries*—Schools have clear, consistent rules and consequences and use a positive approach to discipline.
13. *Neighborhood Boundaries*—Neighbors and friends’ parents help monitor the child’s behavior and provide feedback to the parent(s).

- 
14. *Adult Role Models*—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior and encourage the child to follow these examples.
  15. *Positive Peer Influence*—Parent(s) monitor the child’s friends and encourage spending time with those who set good examples.
  16. *High Expectations*—Parent(s), teachers, and other influential adults encourage the child to do her or his best in all tasks and celebrate their successes.

### **Constructive Use of Time**

17. *Creative Activities*—Child participates weekly in music, dance, or other form of artistic expression outside of school.
18. *Child Programs*—Child participates weekly in at least one sport, club, or organization within the school or community.
19. *Religious Community*—Child participates in age-appropriate religious activities and caring relationships that nurture her or his spiritual development.
20. *Time at Home*—Child spends time at home playing and doing positive activities with the family.

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## **INTERNAL ASSETS**

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### **Commitment to Learning**

21. *Achievement Motivation*—Child is encouraged to remain curious and demonstrates an interest in doing well at school.
22. *Learning Engagement*—Child is enthused about learning and enjoys going to school.
23. *Homework*—With appropriate parental support, child completes assigned homework.
24. *Bonding to School*—Child is encouraged to have and feels a sense of belonging at school.
25. *Reading for Pleasure*—Child listens to and/or reads books outside of school daily.

### **Positive Values**

26. *Caring*—Parent(s) help child grow in empathy, understanding, and helping others.
27. *Equality and Social Justice*—Parent(s) encourage child to be concerned about rules and being fair to everyone.
28. *Integrity*—Parent(s) help child develop her or his own sense of right and wrong behavior.

- 
29. *Honesty*—Parent(s) encourage child’s development in recognizing and telling the truth.
  30. *Responsibility*—Parent(s) encourage child to accept and take responsibility for her or his actions at school and at home.
  31. *Self-Regulation*—Parents encourage child’s growth in regulating her or his own emotions and behaviors and in understanding the importance of healthy habits and choices.

### **Social Competencies**

32. *Planning and Decision Making*—Parent(s) help child think through and plan school and play activities.
33. *Interpersonal Competence*—Child seeks to build friendships and is learning about self-control.
34. *Cultural Competence*—Child continues to learn about her or his own cultural identity and is encouraged to interact positively with children of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

35. *Resistance Skills*—Child is learning to recognize risky or dangerous situations and is able to seek help from trusted adults.
36. *Peaceful Conflict Resolution*—Child continues learning to resolve conflicts without hitting, throwing a tantrum, or using hurtful language.

### **Positive Identity**

37. *Personal Power*—Child has a growing sense of having influence over some of the things that happen in her or his life.
38. *Self-Esteem*—Child likes herself or himself and feels valued by others.
39. *Sense of Purpose*—Child welcomes new experiences and imagines what he or she might do or be in the future.
40. *Positive View of Personal Future*—Child has a growing curiosity about the world and finding her or his place in it.

## UNIT ONE

# Finish the Picture and Masterpiece Creations

*Art is a medium that lets everyone play. And because beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, art is also an equalizer that allows anyone to craft and create.*

Through creative activities, children have the opportunity to explore their artistic side, and through adult and peer encouragement and support in completing such activities, children reap the rewards of self-discovery and the belief in their own abilities. In the following pages, you will find a variety of pictures waiting to be finished. These picture “starts” are meant to encourage budding illustrators and artists, both timid and bold, in their efforts toward artistic expression. They can be completed as each young artist sees fit.

The picture activities are arranged in five categories, each allowing children to express an aspect of how they view themselves as well as the people and world around them. You’ll find pictures and activities for your children under Me and My Family, The People around Me, My School, All about Me, and How I See Things.

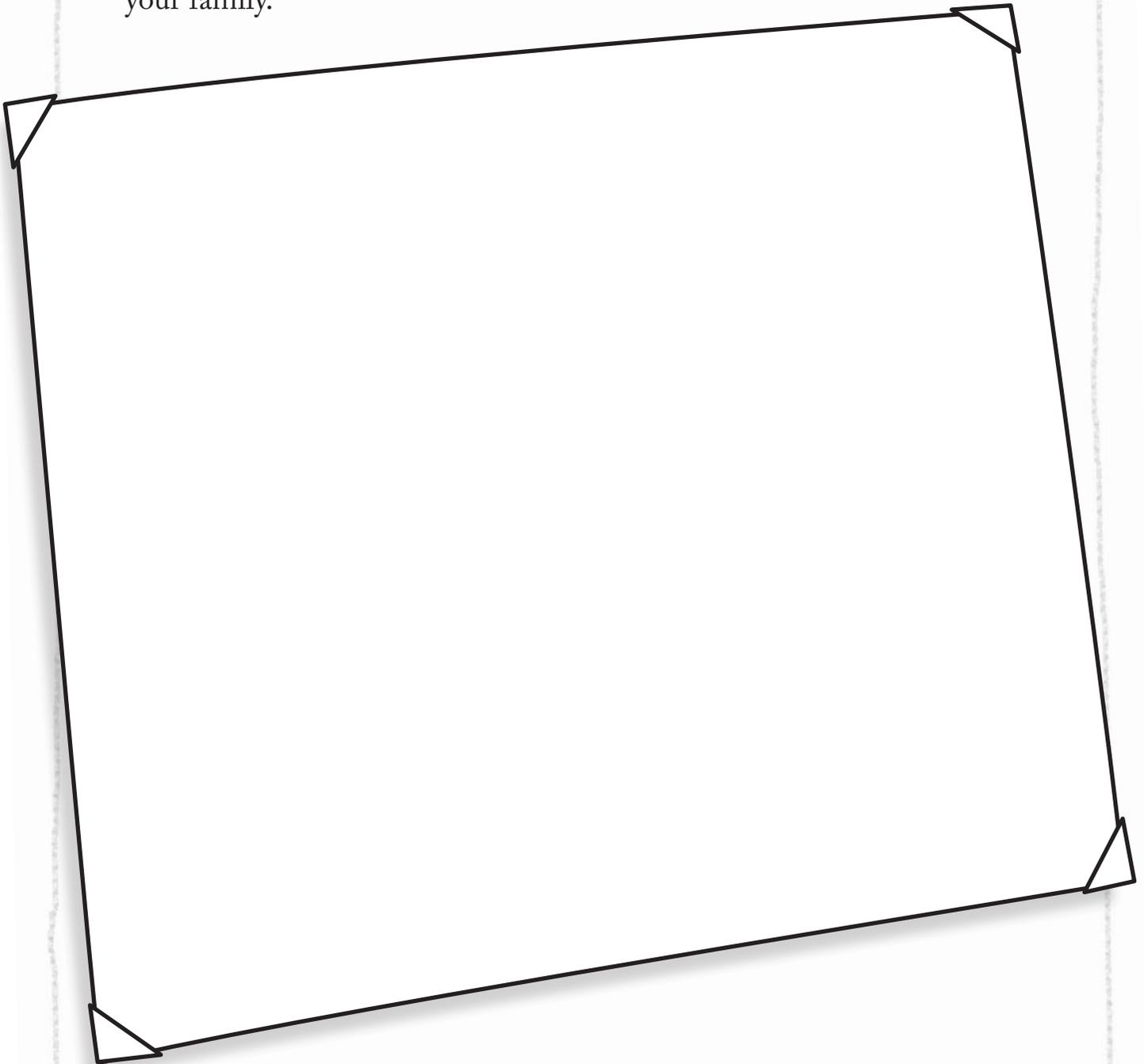
At the beginning of each picture activity is the asset to which it is matched—those that connect the experience of creativity with well-

being and positive development. Each picture includes one or more questions, under the heading of Let's Talk, to use as follow-up after the activity. These questions will help you see what your budding artists see and will help give both meaning and value to what seems to the children like just a fun picture to draw. In some instances, the picture activities are followed with a book icon and a suggested companion book to naturally connect the idea of the picture with a story included in Unit Two.

When well tended, the inner traits of imagination, creativity, and discovery contribute to a child's overall character and well-being. Creative activities can help children thrive in their everyday lives.

# My Best Day

Draw a picture of the best day you have had with your family.



**Let's Talk**

What did you do that was fun?  
Who or what made this the best day?



This picture page connects well to the book *Dancing with Daddy* by Willy Welch. See page 63.