

Cultivating Character in the Digital Age

As part of The John Templeton Foundation’s 2023 open submission cycle, the Character Virtue Development department invites Online Funding Inquiries from organizations around the world for projects on youth thriving in the digital age. We are especially interested in making progress in two broad areas: (a) providing youth, and individuals who work with youth, with the resources and tools needed to cultivate character in the digital age; and (b) supporting research that moves beyond a narrow focus on “screen time” to a more nuanced exploration of the relevant factors and underlying mechanisms that explain the relationship between aspects of digital technology and growth in character.

BACKGROUND

Modern technology is rapidly transforming the lives of children and adolescents, and this transformation has implications for individual health and well-being, as well as the relationships individuals have with peers, family, school, work, and community. Early research on digital innovations and child development have focused on harm and safety, as well as mental and physical health. This important work, however, does not help us understand how children can *thrive* in the digital age. As was true during previous periods of innovation (e.g., the introduction of radio and television), the challenge we face today is understanding how to equip youth, caregivers, educators, and others with the resources and tools necessary to *adapt* to the digital age in a way that allows youth to thrive.

For the purposes of this competition, *character* refers to the thoughts, attitudes, and motivations that guide a person’s behavior. Such qualities are cultivated in the context of close relationships and communities.¹ Some describe these qualities as *strengths of heart* (gratitude, generosity), *mind* (curiosity, humility), and *will* (self-control).² Others use the headings of *moral character* (e.g., gratitude, generosity), *intellectual character* (curiosity, humility), *performance character* (self-control), and *civic character* (civility).³

SCOPE

Successful proposals will advance one of the two broad goals noted in the introduction and have a clearly articulated connection to cultivating character in youth. We welcome a wide variety of types of projects; for illustrative purposes, we have included examples of projects and research questions below.

Resource Development and Program Interventions

The Foundation will support projects that equip youth with the necessary dispositions, skills, and capacities needed to successfully develop habits of good character in the digital era. We will also consider projects that equip adults with the resources they need to be able to promote character development in youth. This may include educational resources for parents, educators, coaches, and/or faith leaders, among others. We also welcome program intervention projects from organizations that work directly with youth.

¹ David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2020); Anne Snyder, *The Fabric of Character: A Wise Giver’s Guide to Supporting Social and Moral Renewal* (Washington, DC: Philanthropy Roundtable, 2019).

² Character Lab, “Character,” accessed February 17, 2021, <https://characterlab.org/character/>.

³ Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Anne Colby et al., *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Scott Seider, *Character Compass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Conversations and Convenings

With the rapid pace of technological advancement, it can be difficult for robust discussions about the implications for character development to keep pace. We seek to catalyze conversations among researchers, educators, and thought leaders that elevate the topic of character in the digital age. What does it mean to have virtuous technology? What does the cultivation of good character look like in virtual communities? Can love flourish in a virtual context? How can organizations elevate youth voices? We welcome projects from organizations that host conversations between stakeholders, including parent groups, educational institutions, tech communities, and youth-serving organizations.

Campaigns

We will consider activation campaigns (i.e., coordinated, evidence-based strategies to design and implement tactics to stir a defined audience to specified voluntary actions) that draw support from multiple funders. Campaigns may pursue outcomes at the individual, family, and/or community level. Sample topics include improving parent–child communication related to technology use, mobilizing youth to catalyze positive change among peers, and working with organizations to establish norms for virtuous use of technology.

Virtual Games and Experiences

We seek innovative projects focused on the cultivation of character in virtual settings. Can virtual games be designed in a way that promotes positive character development? Can character be cultivated in virtual reality? Can businesses be designed in a way that allows technologists to better align their morals and values with the products they are creating?

Research

Although there is an increasing amount of research on the effects of screen time on adolescent well-being, very little research has focused specifically on digital technology and character development. Research questions of interest include: Do caregivers' digital habits influence children's character? How does a virtual community establish and maintain virtuous norms? What role does a caregiver's love play in cultivating character in the digital age? What factors predict children's differential susceptibility to positive and negative effects from digital experiences? We will also consider more evaluative questions around the efficacy of certain platforms or games in promoting character development. We are particularly interested in projects that (a) move beyond a narrow focus on screen time as a monolithic variable; (b) incorporate research/evaluation methods beyond cross-sectional, self-reports; (c) seek to identify the underlying mechanisms that explain variation in youth outcomes; and (d) involve project members from different disciplines and fields.

APPLICATION PROCESS

The Foundation has a two-step application process, the first stage of which is the submission of an Online Funding Inquiry (OFI). OFIs for this competition must be submitted through the Templeton Portal (<https://portal.templeton.org>) by August 18, 2023 for consideration. All OFIs will be reviewed by internal Foundation staff, and applicants will be notified of their OFI status by October 13, 2023. Applicants who receive an invitation to submit a Full Proposal should expect to submit their proposals by January 19, 2024. Applicants will be notified of the outcome of Full Proposal reviews by July 12, 2024.

APPLICATION GUIDELINES

We will consider requests between \$200K and \$1M USD and up to 36 months in duration. We will also consider requests up to \$2M and 57 months in duration, if the applicant can demonstrate a 1:1 co-funding match in Years 4 and 5. Please note that, given the charitable purposes of the Foundation, we seek proposals from organizations that are recognized as public charities (501c3) by the IRS or international organizations with similar standing.

For questions about this call, please contact character@templeton.org