Character and Chastity
A Session for Middle School Youth
By Sister Kieran Sawyer, SSND

Purpose
Participants are taught a simple explanation of what it means to be a person of character. Chastity is then presented as the character strength (virtue) that helps them to make the personal choices needed to control and channel their sexual desires. The session is designed for middle school youth. It can be used with up to 30 participants.

Component: Faith Learning

Note from Sister Kieran: This session begins with a brief explanation of character formation. A fuller teaching of this concept may be found in “Do I Hafta?” (YMA Middle School gathered youth night). I recommend using the “Do I Hafta?” session several weeks before this session, and that the material here be presented as a review with the participants. This will make both sessions more productive and create a healthier concept of virtues.

Note to Leader: Given the content of this session, let parents know in advance that sex will be talked about—in the context of living chaste lives—in the session. Follow your parish’s protocols about keeping parents informed about what you will be discussing with their sons and daughters.

Session at a Glance
7:00 PM Welcome
7:05 PM Character Formation
7:25 PM Character and Chastity
7:45 PM Prayer
7:55 PM Reflection Exercise: The Two Wolves
Extend the Session: Character Chests (add 20 minutes)
8:05 PM Feedback
8:10 PM Announcements and Refreshments
8:15 PM Finish!
Materials Needed
- Nametags, one for each participant
- Large sheets of newsprint and marking pens
- Quarter-sheets of paper, one for each participant
- Pens or pencils, one for each participant
- Handout 1, The Two Wolves, copy double-sided, one for each participant
- Masking tape

Extend the Session: Character Chests
- Two large newsprint sheets:
  - [newsprint #1—heading at top of sheet]
    Character Strengths Needed to Be a Loving Mom or Dad
  - [newsprint #2—heading at the top of sheet]
    Character Strengths Needed to be a Loving Husband or Wife (or Friend)

Note to Leader: When thinking about the headings on these two sheets of newsprint, keep in mind the maturity level of your middle school youth and make sure that these headings will work with your group. It is key for them to understand the concepts, not just see the titles.
- Several pads of multi-colored sticky notes, 3”x5”
- Materials for making the Character Chests
  - Small paper gift boxes, about 2½” by 3”, one for each participant (check craft stores)—or have participants make their own out of heavy weight paper; use the pattern on the last page of this outline
  - Colored markers, one set per table
  - Small, quart-size, baggies to take chests home
- Small pieces (2”x1”) of multi-colored cardstock, at least 15 per participant. Have envelopes full of these ready to give to each table group.

Prepare in Advance
1. Prepare a newsprint sheet with this quote:

   Chastity is the virtue that helps us
to direct our sexuality and sexual desires
toward authentic love, and
away from using people as objects for sexual pleasure.

   Post the sheet on the wall where you will lead the session, folded up in half so participants cannot see what it says.

2. Prepare two additional newsprint sheets:
   - [newsprint #1—heading at top of sheet]
     Levels of Motivation chart
   - [newsprint #2—heading at top of sheet]
     Things to UNDERSTAND about Sex
Have these sheets ready to post at the appropriate time in the session.

3. Set up tables for refreshments and sign-in. Have one or two people at the sign-in table with check-in sheet and nametags. **Hospitality is important!** As the leader, spend the arrival time moving among the participants, greeting and speaking with them.

**Session Outline**

**Welcome (5 minutes)**
Welcome the participants, and ask them to make a nametag. Invite new participants to introduce themselves.

**Character Formation (20 minutes)**
Invite the participants to bring their chairs and sit close to you and the newsprint chart. Say:

Let’s start our session tonight by thinking about little children. Raise your hand if you know a child under the age of six.

For those who raised their hands, ask each to tell about the child they know—his/her name, age, relationship, etc. Continue by asking questions like:

- How does this child get what he/she wants?
- How does he/she act when he/she doesn’t get what he/she wants?
- How does this child act in a store when he/she wants something his/her parents won’t buy?
- What would happen if his/her parents always gave him/her everything he/she wanted?

Begin to create on the newsprint a chart with three columns. **Note to Leader:** If you have previously done the “Do I Hafta?” session with your middle schoolers, point out that the next few minutes will be a review of that session.

Write the word WANTA at the top of the first column. Say:

When you were little children, there were lots of things you wanted. You wanted to have fun, you wanted a new toy, you wanted to eat candy instead of vegetables, you wanted to dump your milk on the floor, you wanted to put mashed potatoes in your hair.

Even though none of us is still a little child, all of us still act on this level sometimes. I’ll call it the ‘Me-and-Now’ level, because when I act on this level, I only think about ME and what I want right NOW. Write **Me & Now** under WANTA in the first column.

I don’t think about how my decisions might affect other people, or about the long-range consequences of my actions. Psychologists call this the Child level (write Child...
in the first column), because when I act on this level I am most like a little child who does whatever he or she feels like doing.

Raise your hand to show us how often you feel like a happy child, playful child, naughty child, hurt child, curious child, angry child, shy child, rebellious child, mean child, bored child, lazy child. Acting on the child level isn’t bad; it just isn’t an adequate way to act for people who aren’t little children any more. Everyone should act on the child level sometimes, but can you imagine what life would be like if everyone always did whatever they felt like doing? Call on a few people to describe the chaos that would result.

At the top of the second column, write HAFTA.

Because parents love their children, they insist that they do things they don’t want to do—things that are good for them—like eating vegetables, drinking milk, going to sleep, and things that are good for others, like sharing their toys, not kicking and biting.

These two levels are still very much a part of our daily lives. There are the things that we wanta do—things that are fun, easy, and exciting like eating chocolate, hanging out with our friends, playing ball, and watching TV. And there are things that we hafta do, like going to school, taking out the garbage, helping with dishes, getting your homework finished.

Call on several participants to tell you something they hafta do, and ask how they usually feel about doing it.

We also call this second level the ‘Power-and-Pressure’ level. Write Power & Pressure under HAFTA in the second column.

We all need people in our lives who have the power to tell us what we hafta do, and who can exert pressure on us to make us do it. Who are these rule makers? Who are the people who have the right and responsibility to tell us what to do and what not to do? It’s an interesting coincidence that many of the power people in our lives start with the letter P.

Help the middle schoolers to name authority people: parents, principals and teachers, police, pastors, pope, peers, employer who pays you, etc.)

Let’s think for a few minutes about the adults in the Power-and-Pressure level, especially our parents. They have a double job. One job is to use whatever power or punishment it takes to get you to do the right thing—they have to “make you” eat your veggies, do your homework, share the remote, rake the lawn. But the second job is much harder—they also have to teach you to understand the rules so you will gradually want to CHOOSE TO do the right thing, even when they aren’t around.

Write CHOOSE TO at the top of the third column.
We call this the ‘Respect and Responsibility’ level. Write Respect & Responsibility under CHOOSE TO in the third column. Ask a volunteer to explain what the words mean.

On this level it’s not the power people who are telling me what to do and what not to do. On this level, my actions are controlled by my own sense of respect for the wants and needs of other people and an inner realization that I am responsible for my own decisions and for how my actions affect the other people in my life. When I act on this level, I am being a person of CHARACTER (write this word in the third column), a person who does the right thing just because it is right, not because someone else says I hafta do it.

Ask a volunteer to point out how Respect and Responsibility are just the opposite of Me and Now.

The goal of all of the adults who love you and care about you is to help you to move into this third column. At what age do you think you begin to operate on the CHOOSE TO level?

Accept some guesses from the participants, then explain that it begins as early as age one! As soon as the child understands the meaning of a rule, and chooses to do something because it is right and not because someone says he/she has to, the rule has become part of his/her personal character system.

So let’s see how you are doing at becoming a person of character. I am going to list some of the life rules that start out in the HAFTA column, but that are gradually moving into the CHOOSE TO column as you are maturing, growing up. When I read an item on the list, you will show us how much you have made it a personal rule by how tall you stand.

If you always do the right thing because you choose to, stand tall. If doing the right thing is your own choice sometimes but not always, shrink down a little. If you do the thing but only because you hafta, crouch way down. If you don’t do it at all, sit on the floor.

As you read the list, expect a little chaos!

- Brush your teeth.
- Eat your vegetables.
- Go to school.
- Do your homework.
- Go to Mass on Sunday (or Saturday).
- Really pray and participate in the Mass.
- Practice for your music lesson (or the play, or football, or…).
- Use table manners.
- Get a good night’s sleep.

Invite the young people to sit. Then direct the next items to individual students, asking whether they do the right thing because they hafta or because they choose to.
- Write thank-you letters at Christmas.
- Help with household chores.
- Tell your parents the truth about the party you want to attend.
- Speak respectfully to the teacher who is scolding you.
- Thank your mom for doing your laundry.
- Help the elderly lady on your block to rake her lawn (or shovel her drive).

**Character and Chastity (20 minutes)**

*Say:* 

I think we could safely say that all of us still have a long way to go in this process of learning to live on the level of character. We need to work at character development in all aspects of our lives—family, school, sports, and friends.

For the rest of this session, we are going to talk about one of the most important areas of life in which we need to be or to become persons of character—**sex**.

Write **SEX** on the chart in the WANTA column.

As you know, you are at a stage in life where your body is beginning to develop sexually. I’m sure you are all very much aware of the physical changes that are happening in your bodies, but you might not be as aware of the changes that are happening in your minds and hearts. Sex is creating in you a whole new set of WANTAs—new thoughts, new feelings, new desires. You are starting to want persons of the other gender to notice you, to talk to you, to send you text messages, to like you. You want to go to boy-girl parties. You want to be able to say that someone special is your boyfriend or girlfriend. All of this is exciting and frightening and embarrassing and fun. It can make girls act really silly and boys act really dumb.

And what happens on the HAFTA level once sex enters the picture? The people who love you make a whole new set of rules (write **NEW RULES** in the HAFTA column) that are meant to help control (write **CONTROL** in the HAFTA column) these powerful new feelings and urges.

Ask several students to name the rules in their family: rules about parties, chaperones, alcohol and drugs, modest dress, curfew, dating age, having friends in the house, movies.

These rules are really important. It is important that you understand the reasons for them and are honest and truthful about following them. But what is more important is that you begin to move the rules into that third column—so that **you choose** to keep the rules as a way to honor and protect your own sexuality and that of your boyfriend or girlfriend. Sex requires a great deal of Respect and Responsibility, both by you and by the person you like. The personal character strength (or virtue) that helps a person to control his or her own sexuality is called Chastity.

Write **CHASTITY** in the third column.

Your bodies are beginning to develop the powerful energy called sexuality. You need to **begin now** to develop the character strengths that will control your own sexuality—especially the virtue of chastity.
Here is a quote from the bishops in our country about this topic: (unfold the newsprint sheet with the quote and read it aloud to the participants)

Chastity is the virtue that helps us
to direct our sexuality and sexual desires
toward authentic love,
and away from using people as objects for sexual pleasure.

Ask:

- How does this quote name the ‘Me-and-Now’ level regarding sex?
- How does it name the Character level?

Post a sheet of newsprint with the heading Things to UNDERSTAND about Sex. Then say:

In the first part of this session, we saw that rules move into the third level when we understand the reasons for them. Brushing our teeth becomes a personal rule when we understand about tooth decay. Eating veggies becomes a personal rule when we understand about vitamins and good health. So what do we have to understand about sex that will help us to develop the virtue of chastity? There are four important things to understand.

1. **Sex produces babies.** Write this on the newsprint sheet.
   I bet you already knew that. But you might not know that babies are one of the main reasons behind the rule that sex should be saved for marriage. Once a baby is born, it needs to be cared for in a loving family. Write LOVING FAMILY.

   Marriage creates the kind of stable, dependable, caring family that a baby will need for the next 18 years (or more). If you aren’t ready to be a parent and create a loving family, you aren’t ready to have sex.

   **Note to Leader:** Be prepared to field comments and/or questions the participants may have about ways to prevent pregnancy. Consult with your diocesan family life office for resources appropriate for talking about this with middle school youth.

2. **Sex is a sign of love.** Write this on the newsprint sheet.
   I bet you knew that too. Let’s think about some other signs of love. Give one student a ‘high five’ and ask what that sign means. Give another a friendly punch on the shoulder and ask what that means. Ask another what a goodnight kiss from her dad means. So what does sex mean? The act of sex means that two people love and trust one another so much that they choose to give their entire lives to one another—forever. If sex doesn’t mean that, it is a lie. Your main job during your adolescent years will be to learn to love that much.

3. **Sex is powerful.** Write this on the newsprint sheet.
This is something you probably don’t know. Most teens your age don’t realize how powerful sex can be—leading people to do things they never dreamed would happen. The sex drive is like a fire inside us. It can be warm and comforting, but it can quickly become a raging blaze that gets out of our control. If we don’t control our sexuality, it controls us, and causes us to do things that are hurtful and destructive. You also need to know that the sex drive is more powerful in the male body than in the female body, so guys need even more self-control than girls.

4. **Sex is holy.** Write this on the newsprint sheet.
   God created sex. God created us to love the way he loves—by giving our lives to and for one another. God calls most of us to give our entire selves in the Sacrament of Marriage. He calls some of us to give our entire selves to him and to his people by being a priest or consecrated religious (brother or sister). If you realize and remember that sex is holy, I am sure you will be less likely to abuse this special gift from God.

You are the one who has to choose whether sex will stay on the ‘Me & Now’ level where it uses people to get whatever it wants, or whether it will move to the level of ‘Character’ where it is directed toward authentic love. Understanding these four things will help you to develop the virtue of chastity. Your goal, as you move through your teen years, should be that your sexuality is controlled by your own values and morals, your sense of responsibility, your respect for yourself and others, your love for God, and your love for this young man or woman you might want to have sex with. Let’s stand and pray that God will help us to do that.

**Body Prayer (10 minutes)**
Invite the students to stand and move to a space where they have enough room to stretch out their arms without touching anyone else. Say:

We have been talking a lot about our bodies today, so we are going use our bodies to pray. This body prayer will help us to be more aware of the wonderful gift God gave us when he created our bodies.

- Run in place and think about what it means to have strong legs and feet. Now stand still. Close your eyes, and thank God for the gift of movement, for the ability to walk, run, skate, bike. Thank God for the freedom to go wherever you wish.

- Stretch your arms up as far as you can. Now stretch them out as far as you can. Now stretch down and forward and touch the ground. Stand still. Close your eyes, and ask God to help you to reach up to Him with love and gratitude, to reach out to others with respect and kindness, to reach down to the earth with care and appreciation.

- Look at your hands. Rub them together. Hold them out in front of you and think of all the things you do with those hands. You can write, draw, throw a ball, type a note, wipe away a tear. Close your eyes, and promise God that you will always use your hands to help others and to show love and tenderness. Ask God to help you never to use them to harm another in any way.
• Reach up and hold your head in your hands. Think about the all the gifts God put in that head—the ability to think, to understand, to study, to read, to dream, to plan. Think about your eyes, your ears, your sense of taste and smell. Thank God for all of these gifts and the way that they make you uniquely you!

• Now hold your arms in front of you and imagine that you are cradling a tiny baby in your arms. God has put into your body the power to create another human person. Someday most of you will hold your own child in your arms. Ask God to help you to develop the love and strength and courage you will need to be a loving parent.

• Cross your hands over your heart. Close your eyes and pray that God will fill your heart with love—love for your parents, your family, your friends, your country. Now imagine that Our Blessed Mother Mary is standing right in front of you, loving you the way she once loved her son Jesus. In your imagination, hold your heart out to her and ask her to keep it safe in her motherly hands until you are ready—on some future day—to give it totally to the person you marry, or to give it totally to God as a priest or brother or sister.

We will close our body prayer with an ancient blessing from the Old Testament Book of Numbers (Num 6:24). Hold your hands out in front of you to receive the blessing from our beloved God.

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
We ask this blessing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reflection Exercise: The Two Wolves (10 minutes)
Invite the young people to be seated at tables. Distribute Handout 1, The Two Wolves, and pencils to each person. Say:

There is an old parable that is found in the history of the Cherokee Indians. I think the story fits very well with what we have been talking about tonight.

Read the story aloud. After the reading, ask a volunteer to explain the connection between the story and the topic of tonight’s session. Then invite the participants to turn to the back side of the paper. Read the top paragraphs, making brief comments as you read. Then explain the grading code, and read each statement, adding a few words of explanation to each. When they have finished, say:

Please fold the paper in half. Take it home and share it with your parents tonight. Be prepared to explain to them everything we talked about in our session tonight.
(Optional) Extend the Session: Character Chests (20 minutes)

Gather the students at tables. Say:

In some pioneer families, a child’s thirteenth birthday was considered a very special day. Children of this age were expected to begin planning for that future day when they would get married, move out of their parents’ home, and start a new family of their own. As a birthday gift, the thirteen-year old would receive a beautiful wooden box which the father himself had built.

For a girl, this would be called a **hope chest**; for a boy, it would be considered a **tool chest**. Throughout their teen years the girls would fill their hope chests with the things their new home would need—towels, bedding, silverware, and such. Some of these things they would make themselves with guidance from their mothers. Some they would receive as gifts or family heirlooms. The boys would fill their chests with the tools required to take care of a house and farm. And they would learn from their fathers the skills they would need to use them. Along the way the young people would also be learning from their parents the character strengths and virtues they would need to be loving spouses and good parents.

Today’s society is much more complicated, isn’t it? Your adolescent years will be so filled with school and parties and sports and driving and jobs, that you might forget about the fact that these years are the time to develop the **character strengths** and **virtues** that you will need when you get to be an adult. This activity is meant to help you focus on those.

Distribute the materials for making the Character Chests. Say:

Young teens in the pioneer world received hope chests and tools chests. We are going to create something like them, which we will call **character chests**. As you are working on them, think about the kind of adult you **hope** to be someday, and the personal character **tools** you will have to develop in order to be that kind of adult.

Direct the students in making the chests following the directions given on the sheet. Step 6 is the hardest. Once they get the flap pasted on the back, the rest is easy.

When most chests are completed, post the sheet of newsprint labeled: **Character Strengths Needed to Be a Loving Mom or Dad**.

Have ready a few packs of brightly colored sticky notes available. Call on individuals to name a character strength or quality needed to be a loving parent. Hand those who respond a sticky note and ask them to write the word large with a colored marker and post it on the newsprint.

*Note to Leader:* You may need to give some hints to help them come up with words like patience, forgiveness, faith, prayerfulness, kindness, tenderness, courage, love, understanding, responsibility, discipline, wisdom, firmness, etc.

When you have several words on the chart, put up the second newsprint sheet labeled: **Character Strengths Needed to Be a Loving Husband or Wife (or Friend)**.
Say:

The best way to think about the character strengths needed to be a loving spouse is 
to think about friendship, because one of the strongest foundations of a good
marriage is a strong, comfortable friendship relationship. So let’s work together to 
name the qualities it takes to be a really good friend.

Use the same procedure as above. Help them to come up with words like trust, kindness, 
truthfulness, respect, dependability, self-control, cooperation, loyalty, leadership, fairness, 
honesty.

Then invite them to copy the character words from the two charts onto the small cards 
and to put the cards into their chests.

When the project is completed, give everyone a small baggie in which to put their 
character chest. Say:

Take your character chest home and put it on your dresser or desk. Every day pull 
out one card and place it on top of the box. Ask God to help you that day to be the 
kind of person described on the card. During the day really work at developing that 
character strength or quality. It is my hope that doing this will help you to remember 
that you are responsible for creating YOU—the loving adult you hope to be someday.

Feedback and Questions (10 minutes)
Distribute quarter sheets of paper. Say:

On this paper please write two things:

• Tell me what you want to remember from this session.
• What more would you like to know about the things we discussed tonight?

You do not have to put your name on the paper, but I encourage you to do so. I will 
read the statements and answer the questions the next time we gather.

Announcements, Refreshments (5 minutes)
Thank the young people for their participation in tonight’s session. Make any needed 
announcements regarding upcoming programs and activities. Invite everyone to enjoy 
some refreshments.
An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life.

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

“One wolf is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.

“The other wolf is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

“This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather,

“Which wolf will win?”

The old chief simply replied,

“The one you feed.”
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Handout 1 (continued)

Our sexual energy is very much like the two wolves within each one of us. Each person must decide which wolf he or she will feed. Sex can be like the bad wolf, causing us to be selfish and cruel and destructive. But we can learn to direct our sexuality toward love, respect, and responsibility—the level of character. Then it will be like the good wolf, helping us to be loving, giving, and caring in all of our relationships.

The society you are growing up in is constantly feeding the bad wolf. Movies, television, songs, some kinds of dance, clothing styles, pornography, alcohol and drugs, peer pressure, parties without chaperones—and many other things that are part of your world—tempt you to make choices that are selfish and destructive.

Listed below are some of the things that can feed the good wolf. Think seriously about each item. Do you choose to make these things a part of the moral code that guides your life? Mark the items to indicate how determined you are to make them a part of your character, your personal set of values and moral.

V = Very determined  S = Somewhat determined  N = Not determined at all

_____ Open discussion with my parents about things sexual
_____ Good, wholesome parties (with chaperones present)
_____ Healthy friendships with members of both genders
_____ Watch only approved TV shows, videos, and movies
_____ Regular attendance at Mass
_____ Reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation
_____ Time spent every day in prayer
_____ Understand, accept, and obey my parents’ rules
_____ Consciously choose to dress modestly
_____ Refuse to send or pass on sex-related text messages or pictures
_____ Daily effort to become a person of character in all aspects of life
Directions:

1. Cut all outside lines, and the dotted line between the side flaps.
2. Fold on all lines, with the lines folded inside. (It might help to fold the lines outside first, then fold them in.)
3. Flip the pattern over to the outside (no lines). Turn it so the flap point is toward you.
4. On the lid print: [YOUR NAME]'S CHARACTER CHEST.
5. Decorate the sections that will show on the outside: lid, flap, sides, front
6. Flip back over so the inside is up and the words are facing you.
7. Put glue on the right flap where it says "paste on back". Fold the flap around and paste it on the outside of the back panel.
8. Repeat with left flap.
9. Fold up the sides and push the flap down inside.
10. Push the front flap down inside.
11. Fold the lid forward; tuck the flap inside. Your Character Chest is finished!