



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

Weaving the Fabric of Christian Character, Part 1 A PROFILE OF DEVELOPMENTAL READINESS A Profile of the Stages of Moral Development & Moral Reasoning

Dear Parent,

As parent you carry multitudinous responsibilities and tasks upon your shoulders, not the least of which is preparing the foundation for soul formation within your child. Your child's well-being, self-esteem, happiness, and the welfare of society are, in large part, related to the character growth, moral development, and conscience formation of your child. All children need soul formation; Christian parents desire that growth to be rooted in Jesus Christ. The term Christian Character refers, then, to the moral development of conscience that is open to and shaped by the Holy Spirit.

The formation of Christian Character is a life-long task. Children grow and mature physically, emotionally, and socially in stages; just so, the moral development of conscience involves a consistent process of teaching and refinement. In order to be agents of soul formation, parents need to understand the process of development and to know how to relate to children at each stage of development. This letter will profile the stages of moral development and moral reasoning. A subsequent letter will suggest stage-appropriate ways of relating to children at each stage of development.

Lawrence Kohlberg identified three distinct levels of moral development, each having two stages occurring within them. The ages associated with each stage indicate reasonable developmental expectations for a child of normal intelligence growing up in a supportive moral environment. The stages represent theories of right and wrong that motivate us. And each new stage of moral reasoning brings us a step closer to a fully developed morality of respect. Respect is the keystone of character development. The family is the primary environment for growth through the stages but we are also influenced by general intelligence and the amount and variety of social interaction that a child experiences.

On the reverse side of this newsletter is an outline of Kohlberg's stages of moral development and reasoning as they apply to children of elementary grade school age (Kindergarten - Grade 8), that is, stages 1 through 4. **Prior to stage 1 maturity (the preschool years)**, children are characterized by egocentric reasoning; they recognize one point of view: their own! Other points of view do not penetrate their awareness. They reason: "I want it, therefore it's not fair if I don't get it." Right to them means "I should get my own way." Rewards and punishments motivate their actions. Three to five year olds focus exclusively on what they know best: their own desires. From the standpoint of moral reasoning, that is stage zero. For fuller descriptions and suggestions for understanding children at each stage of development, visit your local bookstore or library and treat yourself to Raising Good Children from Birth Through the Teenage Years, written by Dr. Thomas Lickona.

May the information shared in this letter affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine how best to provide for the Christian Character development of your child.

Stages in the Process of Moral Reasoning Development for Children of Elementary School Age

(Adapted from Thomas Lickona, *Raising Good Children*)

[Ages suggest developmental expectations for a child of normal intelligence in a supportive moral environment]

LEVEL 1: PRE-CONVENTIONAL LEVEL (Self Interest Motivation)

Moral thinking is determined by the Consequences of Actions

(KINDERGARTEN AGE)

Stage 1: Reward and Punishment Orientation

Moral Reasoning: Unquestioning Obedience

Good and bad are seen/defined in terms of earning rewards and avoiding punishments

What's Right? I should do what I am told.

Reason to be Good? To stay out of trouble

(EARLY CHILDHOOD: Grades 1-3)

Stage 2: Me First / Pleasure-Seeking Orientation

Moral Reasoning: What's-in-it-for-me; Fairness

Decisions are made on the basis of what makes me feel good or bad. Right action is determined by one's own needs. Concern for the needs of others is largely a matter of "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," -- not of loyalty, gratitude or justice.

What's Right? I should look out for myself but be fair to those who are fair to me.

Reason to be Good? Self-interest: What's in it for me?

LEVEL 2: CONVENTIONAL LEVEL (Outside Motivation; Thought of Others)

Moral thinking and actions are directed by a desire to conform to the expectations of others or to uphold socially accepted rules and values

(MIDDLE CHILDHOOD: Grades 4 - 6)

Stage 3: Pleasing Others; Good Boy/Good Girl Orientation

Moral Reasoning: Interpersonal Community

What is right is what pleases others in the immediate group; what is wrong is what displeases them. The emphasis is on "being nice".

What's Right? I should be a nice person and live up to the expectations of people I know and care about.

Reason to be Good? So others will think well of me (social approval) and I can think well of myself (self-esteem).

(EARLY ADOLESCENCE: Grades 7-8)

Stage 4: It's Your Duty; Authority Orientation

Moral Reasoning: Responsibility to "The System"

Duty and law determine what is right. Upholding law, order, and authority, doing one's duty and following social rules are emphasized.

What's Right? I should fulfill my responsibilities to the social or value system if I feel part of it.

Reason to be Good? To keep the system from falling apart and to maintain self-respect as somebody who meets my obligations.

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