Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

A Parent Guide for Middle School Years, PART 3
THE MORAL 'TWEEN

Morality is a personal code of habits or principles of good and bad, right and wrong. A person's moral sense evolves through life. The moral development of 'tween-stagers, the focus of this newsletter, reflects the moral reasoning theory of Lawrence Kohlberg who suggested that motivational thinking prompts codes of conduct.

Kohlberg (1927-1987) applied the cognitive development theory of Jean Piaget to the study of moral reasoning. He hypothesized that when people experience a lack of harmony in their usual thought pattern (*cognitive dissonance*) or moral discomfort (*disequilibrium*) in a situation, they reason how to resolve the issue based on what they consider to be right and what they consider to be a reason to be good, as they define good. Kohlberg created stories of struggle (*moral dilemmas*) and then observed how children reasoned their solutions. From the pattern of responses that he observed during his research, Kohlberg determined that there were three basic levels of moral reasoning: (1) a self-focused morality, (2) an other-focused morality, and (3) a principle-focused morality. Each level of moral development includes two stages.

Moral maturity does not happen because of a birthday. An adult person may function at a child's level. Though stages represent a rank-order direction or movement towards adulthood, they are more fluid than rigid, and the age correlations suggested are merely guidelines. A variety of conditions influence movement from one stage to the next. Additionally, even though a child exhibits one particular stage, he/she may move in and out of the stage in a given circumstance. 'Tweens *ought* to have completed stages 0, 1, and 2 and begin stage 3 by age nine.

STAGE 0 (*pre-school years*) **IS A *PRE-REASONING* LEVEL**. It is characterized by egocentric reasoning and motivated by self-satisfaction. *Right* is getting my own way. *Good* is getting rewards and avoiding punishment. The implication is, "Me, Myself, and I."

STAGES 1 AND 2 REFLECT THE *PRE-CONVENTIONAL REASONING* LEVEL. Reasoners at this level judge the morality of an action by its direct consequences and the benefit awarded to them.

Stage 1 (Kindergarten) is characterized by unquestioning obedience and respect for power.

Stage one is motivated by reward and punishment. *Right* is what I can do without getting into trouble. *Good* is being obedient to the people in power so as to avoid punishment. The implication is, "Might makes right."

Stage 2 (Grades 1-2-3) are characterized by fairness and "looking out for #1." Motivated by a "me first," self-serving, and pleasure-seeking attitude, stage twos think that *right* is taking care of self and being fair to those who are fair to them in a "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" kind of way. *Good* is self-interest and the implication is, "What's in it for me?"

STAGES 3 AND 4 REFLECT THE *CONVENTIONAL REASONING* LEVEL. Those who reason in a conventional way judge the morality of actions by comparing them to society's views and expectations.

Stage 3 spans grades 4 through 9. It is characterized by interpersonal conformity to please important others. Parents and teachers are the important others during the younger years. During the 'tween years peers take first place in importance. Young stage threes desire to be thought of as good and nice. 'Tween-stagers want to be considered necessary, preferred, and valuable to the team. Stage threes are motivated by approval. *Right* is living up the expectations of the significant others that they know and care about. *Good* is having others think well of them (social approval) so that they think well of themselves (self-esteem). The internal law in grades 4-5-6 is, "I want to be nice. I want people to think well of me." The internal law of 'tweens is, "I want to be accepted and preferred by my peers."

Stage 4 (that ought to begin in high school) assumes responsibility to "the system." The stage is characterized by law-and-order thinking and motivated by a "duty first" attitude. *Right* is fulfilling responsibility to the social system. *Good* is keeping the system from falling apart and maintaining self-respect through keeping commitments and fulfilling obligations to society's rules. The implication is, "I'll do my duty."

Proactive Parent Practices

Moral growth occurs when parents and teachers meet children "where they are" and advance their thinking, one stage beyond. How? Through moral dialogue that introduces mental discomfort (*disequilibrium*) and, in turn, challenges the moral reasoning of the 'tween.

• Help children develop a conscience independent from the crowd, based on self-respect and social responsibility.

• Conscience shifts from rules to an inner standard. Communicate the perception that Gospel principles and the Commandments are tools for relationship with self, God and others rather than sterile laws.

• Discuss social and moral issues that focus on the relationship between the individual and society and our common responsibility to cooperate for the common good.

• Teach children to apply to issues the standard, "What if everybody did this?"

• Encourage growth in initiative and industry – essential elements for functioning as a responsible member of society, i.e., holding a job, serving the community, helping outside the family.

• Help children to develop goals and to view work as a way of contributing to the welfare of others.

• Seek 'tween opinions and listen carefully. Involve them in family discussion, planning and problem-solving.

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