



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

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

Guide to Whole Person Development – PART 4 THE MORAL SELF

Consider the maxim: “Right is still right if nobody does it; and wrong is still wrong if everybody does it.” How does a person grow to know right from wrong and good from bad? How is it that a teenager may have a more highly developed standard of moral behavior than a person twice his/her age? Morality is a personal code of habits or principles of good and bad, right and wrong. Morality influences a person’s ethics—social standards for right conduct or practices. Together they shape personal holiness and the common good. Moral growth is rooted in the home. The foundation for moral readiness occurs in the first three years of life. At that stage parents are the moral voice or compass when they say such things as, “Good boy!” “Tell Grandma that you are sorry,” or “Thank you for sharing your toy.” As children grow, moral development is influenced and encouraged by parenting practices; home environment; and the influences of other significant adults, peers, education, and situations. The focus of this newsletter is the moral self—an exploration of the moral reasoning theory of Lawrence Kohlberg which suggests the motivational thinking that prompts codes of conduct.

THE MORAL SELF

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) applied the developmental approach of Piaget to the study of moral reasoning. He explored how people develop **moral codes**, that is, *principles or habits of right and wrong conduct*. He proposed **moral dilemmas**, *stories of struggle* that caused children to experience **cognitive dissonance** (*lack of harmony in thought*) and **disequilibrium** (*moral discomfort*). Then he observed how children reasoned their solutions. He found that children based their decisions upon (1) what they considered to be right and (2) what they considered a reason to be good. From the pattern of responses that he observed during his research, Kohlberg determined that there were three basic levels of moral reasoning, each consisting of two stages. The **Preconventional Level**, a self-focused morality, includes stage one (kindergarten) and stage two (grades 1-3); the **Conventional Level**, other-focused morality, includes stage three (grades 4-6 and early mid-teens in grades 7-8-9) and

stage four (high school and late teens); and the **Postconventional Level**, principle-focused morality, includes stages five and six. How does growth occur from one stage to the next? Dr. Doreen Ferreira Jones, assistant professor at the Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership of the University of San Francisco and frequent presenter on topics of moral education, speaks of the “Plus One Theory,” a term coined by researcher Elliot Turiel. Jones explains that individuals are attracted to moral thinking that is one stage higher than their own, but they cannot comprehend the reasoning of stages beyond that interval. Dr. Jones advises parents and teachers to meet children where they are and advance their thinking, one stage at a time. Parents and teachers do that through moral dialogue that introduces disequilibrium (mental discomfort) and, in turn, challenges the moral reasoning of a child.

An abbreviated version of moral development follows. It reflects primarily the work of developmental psychologist Dr. Thomas Lickona by summarizing each stage of moral reasoning according to (1) characteristics, (2) motivation, (3) what a child considers right and (4) a child’s reason to be good. Additionally a sampling of parenting suggestions are offered for stages one through four (pre-school to high school). Lickona’s book, *Raising Good Children* (1994), is a ‘must read’ for parents and educators. In it he explains the foundation of moral development, devoting one chapter to each stage of moral reasoning, and offers practical advice for stage growth and concerns like communication, fairness, TV, sex, and drugs. May this newsletter support your efforts toward the moral development of your child.

PRE-LEVEL

Stage 0 (Pre-School Years)

Characterized by egocentric reasoning. Motivated by self-satisfaction. Right is getting my own way. Good is getting rewards and avoiding punishment. Motto: "Me, Myself, and I." **ADVICE:** Focus children on being kind to others, saying "please" and "thank you," showing empathy, moving towards team work, living the Golden Rule, and taking care of things.

LEVEL I: PRE-CONVENTIONAL REASONING

Stage 1 (Kindergarten)

Characterized by unquestioning obedience; respect for power and punishment. 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. Motto: "Might makes right." **ADVICE:** Set standards for acceptable behavior and provide reasons why a behavior is appropriate or inappropriate (inductive method of discipline). Avoid saying, "Don't let me catch you doing that again." That will translate into becoming sneaky or lying. Teach that lying is wrong because it breaks trust and, therefore, weakens relationships.

Stage 2 (Grades 1-2-3)

Characterized by fairness and "looking out for #1." Motivated by a "me first," self-serving, and pleasure-seeking attitude. Right is looking out for myself and being fair to those who are fair to me; "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." Good is self-interest. Motto: "What's in it for me?" **ADVICE:** Employ tit-for-tat reciprocity. Appeal to love instead of fairness as a motivation. Practice kind, caring actions beyond the family. Exact responsibility for actions. Using the inductive method of discipline (explaining reason behind rules) promotes empathy, compassion, and cooperation.

LEVEL II: CONVENTIONAL REASONING

Stage 3 (Grades 4-5-6) and (Grades 7-8-9)

Characterized by interpersonal conformity to please important others; desiring to be thought of as a "good boy," "nice girl," or "valuable team member." Motivated by approval. Right is thinking that I should be a nice person and live up to the expectations of people I know and care about. Good is having others think well of me (social approval) so that I think well of myself (self-esteem). Motto: "I want to be nice."

ADVICE: Conscience shifts from rules to an inner standard. Explore Gospel principles and the Ten Commandments as tools for relationship with self, God, and others. Help child to establish individual identity within the family. Foster positive self-concept. Don't make comparisons to others. Strive to decrease parental control and increase child independence and self-reliance. Strengthen family life and responsibility to family, and display affection.

Stage 4 (High School-Late Teens)

Characterized by responsibility to the system; law-and-order thinking. Motivated by a "duty first" attitude. Right is fulfilling responsibility to the social system to which I belong. Good is keeping the system from falling apart and maintaining self-respect through keeping commitments and fulfilling obligations to society's rules. Motto: "I'll do my duty." **ADVICE:** Encourage independent conscience based on self-respect and social responsibility. Develop a sense of the common good. Foster initiative and industry with emphasis on service to the human family. Openly discuss ethical issues, controversial topics, and moral dilemmas. Practice the principles of Catholic social teaching.

LEVEL III: POST-CONVENTIONAL REASONING

Stage 5

(Young Adulthood; 20% of adult population)

Characterized by social contract, individual rights, and democratically decided laws. Motivated by a genuine interest in the welfare of others; justice through democracy. Right is showing respect for the rights and dignity of every individual person and supporting a system that protects human rights. Good is upholding the values of the group or culture. Motto: "I'll live by the rules or try to change them."

Stage 6

(Self-Actualized Adults; 5-10% of adult population)

Characterized by freely chosen, personal commitment to ethical principles that are applied universally, i.e., justice, reciprocity, human dignity and equality for all people in all circumstances. Universal principles prevail if social law or custom conflicts with them. Motivated by unconditional love that transcends all boundaries. Right is standing behind decisions that foster human dignity. Good is acting with integrity according to the principles of my conscience. Motto: "I'm true to my values."

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