

## MORAL DEVELOPMENTS

Morality is our ability to learn the difference between right or wrong and understand how to make the right choices. As with other facets of development, morality doesn't form independently from the previous areas we have been discussing. Children's experiences at home, the environment around them, and their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social skills influence their developing sense of right vs. wrong.

**Ages 0-1:** While infants have no concept of morality, they know what feels good or bad, which can translate to right and wrong. When adults provide physical and emotional care, it helps a baby feel safe and “right.” Responding to a baby’s needs — from diaper changes to holding and communicating with him or her — sets an early standard for how to treat others with care and respect. While a sense of morality takes a long time to develop, by the end of the first year, most babies are beginning to learn about right and wrong, and are learning to imitate and communicate feelings and preferences.

Between the **ages of 2 and 5**, many children start to show morally-based behaviors and beliefs. For example, Tasha may see Juan take the blocks out of Tyler's hands and say, "Juan! You're gonna get in trouble!" At this point, many young children also start to show empathy-based guilt when they break the rules. For example, if Juan from the above example sees Tyler cry because his blocks were stolen, Juan might start feeling somewhat bad that he hurt Tyler's feelings. As a younger child, however, Juan would feel badly only if he was punished for taking the blocks rather than making someone else sad.

**Ages 1-3:** Toddlers are often impulsive, acting before thinking. At this stage, children begin to understand the concept of okay/not okay, and may start to show shame, guilt or remorse if they do something wrong. While they begin to realize that others have feelings and needs, toddlers do not yet have the ability to truly distinguish between right and wrong. Instead, parents and other caregivers define moral behavior and begin to help children recognize a code of ethics — e.g., “We don’t take other peoples’ toys because we wouldn’t want them to take ours.” Caregivers serve as role models for ethical behavior. Consistently offering guidance, correction, and consequences helps teach children about the impact of their behavior on themselves and others, and helps define right and wrong.

**Ages 4-5:** Preschoolers begin to develop their own ideas of right and wrong, and they are better able to follow rules. While preschool children may be motivated to behave ethically or morally to avoid punishment or be praised, they also have an increasing understanding of the feelings and rights of other people. Though children at this stage often need to be reminded of rules and need guidance following them, they also begin to develop a strong sense of fairness and acceptable behavior. Parents can help children develop a moral code by discussing ethical dilemmas and talking about feelings. Setting clear boundaries, expectations, and consequences for moral behavior can help preschoolers clarify values.

According to Piaget, children between the **ages of 5 and 10** see the world through a Heteronomous Morality. In other words, children think that authority figures such as parents and teachers have rules that young people must follow absolutely. Rules are thought of as

real, unchangeable guidelines rather than evolving, negotiable, or situational. As they grow older, develop more abstract thinking, and become less self-focused, children become capable of forming more flexible rules and applying them selectively for the sake of shared objectives and a desire to co-operate.

At late childhood stage of development, the child can make substantial growth in his understanding of the notions of right and wrong. He develops tolerance, honesty and justice. An important thing in the moral development of the child at this stage is the conflict between the morality at home and that of the gang. In manners, speech and general behaviour, the gang will have the maximum influence. In matters of religion and race attitude, the home influences will prevail.

The delinquent child at this age is easily noticed. Stealing, lying and bullying are common among the children at this age.

### **Adolescence**

Adolescents are receptive to their culture, to the models they see at home, in school and in the mass media. These observations influence moral reasoning and moral behavior. When children are younger, their family, culture, and religion greatly influence their moral decision-making. During the early adolescent period, peers have a much greater influence. Peer pressure can exert a powerful influence because friends play a more significant role in teens' lives. Furthermore, the new ability to think abstractly enables youth to recognize that rules are simply created by other people. As a result, teens begin to question the absolute authority of parents, schools, government, and other traditional institutions (Vera-Estay, Dooley, & Beauchamp, 2014). By late adolescence, most teens are less rebellious as they have begun to establish their own identity, their own belief system, and their own place in the world.

Unfortunately, some adolescents have life experiences that may interfere with their moral development. Traumatic experiences may cause them to view the world as unjust and unfair. Additionally, social learning also impacts moral development. Adolescents may have observed the adults in their lives making immoral decisions that disregarded the rights and welfare of others, leading these youth to develop beliefs and values that are contrary to the rest of society. That being said, adults have opportunities to support moral development by modeling the moral character that we want to see in our children. Parents are particularly important because they are generally the original source of moral guidance. Authoritative parenting facilitates children's moral growth better than other parenting styles and one of the most influential things a parent can do is to encourage the right kind of peer relations. While parents may find this process of moral development difficult or challenging, it is important to remember that this developmental step is essential to their children's well-being and ultimate success in life.

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as such, they may choose to participate in activities that demonstrate their moral convictions. For example, some college students may organize and participate in demonstrations and protests while other students may volunteer their time for projects that advance the ethical principles they hold important.

### **Theories of Moral Development**

Developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg built on Piaget's work to create his theory of the Stages of Moral Understanding. According to Kohlberg, young children at this age base their morality on a punishment and obedience orientation. Much like Piaget, Kohlberg believed that young children behave morally because they fear authority and try to avoid punishment. In other words, little kids follow the rules because they don't want to get in trouble. It's too much to expect preschool-aged children to automatically "do the right thing". However, most young children can understand the difference between "good" and "bad" behavior, and this understanding provides the basis for more complicated moral thinking in the future.

Moral development is a concern for every parent. Teaching a child to distinguish right from wrong and to behave accordingly is a goal of parenting. Moral development is a complex issue that—since the beginning of human civilization—has been a topic of discussion among some of the world's most distinguished psychologists, theologians, and culture theorists. It was not studied scientifically until the late 1950s.

### **Piaget's theory of moral reasoning**

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, explored how children developed moral reasoning. He rejected the idea that children learn and internalize the rules and morals of society by being given the rules and forced to adhere to them. Through his research on how children formed their judgments about moral behavior, he recognized that children learn morality best by having to deal with others in groups. He reasoned that there was a process by which children conform to society's norms of what is right and wrong, and that the process was active rather than passive.

Piaget found two main differences in how children thought about moral behavior. Very young children's thinking is based on how actions affected them or what the results of an action were. For example, young children will say that when trying to reach a forbidden cookie jar, breaking 10 cups is worse than breaking one. They also recognize the sanctity of rules. For example, they understand that they cannot make up new rules to a game; they have to play by what the rule book says or what is commonly known to be the rules. Piaget called this "moral realism with objective responsibility." It explains why young children are concerned with outcomes rather than intentions.

Older children look at motives behind actions rather than consequences of actions. They are also able to examine rules, determining whether they are fair or not, and apply these rules and their modifications to situations requiring negotiation, assuring that everyone affected by the rules is treated fairly. Piaget felt that the best moral learning came from these cooperative

decision-making and problem-solving events. He also believed that children developed moral reasoning quickly and at an early age.

### **Kohlberg's theory of moral development**

Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist, extended Piaget's work in cognitive reasoning into adolescence and adulthood. He felt that moral development was a slow process and evolved over time. Still, his six stages of moral development, drafted in 1958, mirrors Piaget's early model. Kohlberg believed that individuals made progress by mastering each stage, one at a time. A person could not skip stages. He also felt that the only way to encourage growth through these stages was by discussion of moral dilemmas and by participation in consensus democracy within small groups. Consensus democracy was rule by agreement of the group, not majority rule. This would stimulate and broaden the thinking of children and adults, allowing them to progress from one stage to another.

**PRECONVENTIONAL LEVEL** The child at the first and most basic level, the preconventional level, is concerned with avoiding punishment and getting needs met. This level has two stages and applies to children up to 10 years of age.

Stage one is the Punishment-Obedience stage. Children obey rules because they are told to do so by an authority figure (parent or teacher), and they fear punishment if they do not follow rules. Children at this stage are not able to see someone else's side.

Stage two is the Individual, Instrumentation, and Exchange stage. Here, the behavior is governed by moral reciprocity. The child will follow rules if there is a known benefit to him or her. Children at this stage also mete out justice in an eye-for-an-eye manner or according to Golden Rule logic. In other words, if one child hits another, the injured child will hit back. This is considered equitable justice. Children in this stage are very concerned with what is fair.

Children will also make deals with each other and even adults. They will agree to behave in a certain way for a payoff. "I'll do this, if you will do that." Sometimes, the payoff is in the knowledge that behaving correctly is in the child's own best interest. They receive approval from authority figures or admirations from peers, avoid blame, or behave in accordance with their concept of self. They are just beginning to understand that others have their own needs and drives.

**CONVENTIONAL LEVEL** This level broadens the scope of human wants and needs. Children in this level are concerned about being accepted by others and living up to their expectations. This stage begins around age 10 but lasts well into adulthood, and is the stage most adults remain at throughout their lives.

Stage three, Interpersonal Conformity, is often called the "good boy/good girl" stage. Here, children do the right thing because it is good for the family, peer group, team, school, or church. They understand the concepts of trust, loyalty, and gratitude. They abide by the Golden Rule as it applies to people around them every day. Morality is acting in accordance to what the social group says is right and moral.

Stage four is the Law and Order, or Social System and Conscience stage. Children and adults at this stage abide by the rules of the society in which they live. These laws and rules become the backbone for all right and wrong actions. Children and adults feel compelled to do their duty and show respect for authority. This is still moral behavior based on authority, but reflects a shift from the social group to society at large.

**POST-CONVENTIONAL LEVEL** Some teenagers and adults move beyond conventional morality and enter morality based on reason, examining the relative values and opinions of the groups with which they interact. Few adults reach this stage.

Correct behavior is governed by the sixth stage, the Social Contract and Individual Rights stage. Individuals in this stage understand that codes of conduct are relative to their social group. This varies from culture to culture and subgroup to subgroup. With that in mind, the individual enters into a contract with fellow human beings to treat them fairly and kindly and to respect authority when it is equally moral and deserved. They also agree to obey laws and social rules of conduct that promote respect for individuals and value the few universal moral values that they recognize. Moral behavior and moral decisions are based on the greatest good for the greatest number.

Stage six is the Principled Conscience or the Universal/Ethical Principles stage. Here, individuals examine the validity of society's laws and govern themselves by what they consider to be universal moral principles, usually involving equal rights and respect. They obey laws and social rules that fall in line with these universal principles, but not others they deem as aberrant. Adults here are motivated by individual conscience that transcends cultural, religious, or social convention rules. Kohlberg recognized this last stage but found so few people who lived by this concept of moral behavior that he could not study it in detail.