**MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

How do we learn right from wrong?

Is there always a clear right answer when it comes to ethical/moral behavior?

How do we help children develop a sense of morality?

**Question to participants:** How did you develop your moral code? Do you recall an ethical dilemma you have had, and how did you resolve it?

How do we define morality? We may not always agree on the right or wrong thing to do in every situation, but generally, morality involves fairness, justice, and consideration of welfare of others including a sense of empathy. Moral/ethical decisions can be situational. For instance, most would agree that killing someone is wrong, but what about in war or self-defense? Most would agree it is wrong to take something that doesn’t belong to you. If someone found an envelop on the street outside a bank containing $100 would it be wrong to keep it? Would it matter if the person who found it was a millionaire versus a single parent who had been praying she might have some money to buy her children Christmas presents or to put food on the table? Would it matter if it was $1 rather than $100?

What about those who hid Jews from the Nazis in order to save them from death? They were breaking laws, failing to obey authorities, and being dishonest. But, the sense of fairness, justice and preservation of human life were more important.

Certainly, moral people can disagree on various issues (example: abortion, physician assisted death) depending on personal values and beliefs. The ethical answer to a dilemma may differ from a legal answer or may differ among ethical individuals.

(allow time for discussion)

Morals/ethics can come from various sources:

* Religious beliefs/guidelines
* What we learned from parents/family
* The golden rule
* Empathy
* What we see in the media
* Observation of the behaviors of others including friends or society as a whole
* Laws and codes of conduct

From an early age, children figure out “norms” by observation and interaction with others. Infants do not really make moral decisions but preschoolers may be able to distinguish right or wrong actions based on elementary concepts. Children and adults might evaluate moral behavior in a number of ways: will I get in trouble if I do this? Is this against the law? Is this against my religious beliefs and what does it mean to violate those beliefs ( will I go to “hell”, be excommunicated?, etc), will someone be mad at me or disappointed in me? What would feel the best or be in my self-interest? Would someone get hurt and how badly? What behavior will get my needs met? Is this just and fair?

Moral decisions based on justice and fairness are generally considered to be a higher level of thinking than “law and order” or what someone else deems right or wrong. While we want children to learn to follow rules, we also want them to be able to know how to challenge unfair rules/practices without violating the rights or needs of others.

Lawrence Kolhberg conducted research to help determine how children develop moral reasoning. He presented boys with situations and asked the what they thought was right or wrong – and asked them to explain why. One of his situations:

*In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. the drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $400 for the radium and charged $4,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about $2,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from if." So, having tried every legal means, Heinz gets desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.*

1. Should Heinz steal the drug? Why or why not?

2. Is it actually right or wrong for him to steal the drug? Why is it right or wrong?

3. Does Heinz have a duty or obligation to steal the drug? Why or why not?

4. If Heinz doesn't love his wife, should he steal the drug for her? Does it make a difference in what Heinz should do whether or not he loves his wife? Why or why not?

5. Suppose the person dying is not his wife but a stranger. Should Heinz steal the drug for the stranger? Why or why not?

6. Suppose it's a pet animal he loves. should Heinz steal to save the pet animal? Why or why not?

7. Is it important for people to do everything they can to save another's life? Why or why not?

8. It is against the law for Heinz to steal. Does that make it morally wrong? Why or why not?

9. In general, should people try to do everything they can to obey the law? Why or why not?

9b. How does this apply to what Heinz should do?

10. In thinking back over the dilemma, what would you say is the most responsible thing for Heinz to do? Why?

Some children based their decision on “law and order” – the moral value is you should not break the law. Others based it on getting into trouble – he shouldn’t steal it because he would get in trouble. Still others said it was the right thing to do because saving a life is more important than getting into trouble. Those who placed the welfare of others and fairness above the law or fear of getting caught were considered to be at a higher level of moral reasoning. Kohlberg believed children go through phases of moral reasoning and may or may not eventually reach that higher level. He believed they could be helped to reach that level by presented various dilemmas and helping them think the situations through. There a limits to Kohlberg’s research and other theories exist.

For more on Kohlberg: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/wm-lifespandevelopment/chapter/kohlbergs-stages-of-moral-development/>

So how do we help children develop a sense of morality and ability to make choices based on reasoned examination of the situation and important values such as fairness, justice, and the well-being of others?

“True moral behavior involves a number of internal processes that are best developed through warm, caring parenting with clear and consistent expectations, emphasis on the reinforcement of positive behaviors rather than the punishment of negative ones, modeling of moral behavior by adults, and creation of opportunities for the child to practice moral reasoning and actions.” (<http://www.healthofchildren.com/M/Moral-Development.html>)

Breaking that down:

*Warm, caring parenting* – nurturance and support is important. Children and adolescents need to have a trusting adult who will listen, help them problem solve, be supportive- while being nonjudgmental as they try to work out solutions to moral dilemmas and cope with “slips” in decision making – or results of poor choices. Help them think about what they could do and what the possible consequences are of each action or what they might have done different or could do differently next time.

Note to trainer: Might replay or remind participants of the Vernon scene where he tried to destroy the rose bushes, or the example when the foster mother was walking home with the adolescent who had gotten into trouble in school.

*Clear and consistent expectations* – Rules, expectations, and consequences should be clear, age-appropriate, fair, and reasonable. When children or youth behave appropriately, acknowledge that. When children or youth behave in opposition to expectations, discuss what happened and what they could have done differently. Adolescents can collaborate in defining reasonable expectations, limits, rules, and consequences.

*Emphasis on the reinforcement of positive behaviors rather than the punishment of negative ones*- Praise, praise, praise - remember the rule of 6 praises for each correction (this is from Trauma training- if participants have not been through that training – might use the activity with taking and putting back candy to illustrate the point) – This does not imply being overly permissive – it means balancing authority with understanding and nurturance. Avoid punishment but rather look for natural or logical consequences which might include apologies or restitution. It is always important to discuss how the situation could have been handled differently. Spanking does not teach children and youth how to behave in an ethical manner. It might stop the behavior temporarily but does not help teach proper behavior. (more about this later).

*Modeling of moral behavior by adults* – This is probably the most important one. Children will copy what they observe or hear. The best way to help children develop ethical behavior is by seeing models of such behavior from important adults or role models in their lives. (this can also include TV shows and other media – especially in younger children). It doesn’t matter what they are told- it is what they see in action that will have the most impact. Watch your own behavior! – Have you ever lied about your child’s age in order to get a lower rate on food, admission to events, etc? Are you honest on your taxes and in interactions with others? What tone of voice do you use with your child when correcting behavior - is it firm, yet understanding or is it critical, judgmental, demeaning, belittling, or shaming? If you want your child to develop a moral compass, practice what you preach. If you are not honest, you teach a child it is ok to lie; if you spank a child, you teach it is ok to hit, humiliate, shame, bully, or cause pain to others; if you are unkind to others (including harsh tones instead of compassionate ones) your child learns that is ok. Children and “sponges” – they copy what they see. And they don’t miss much – you may think you are hiding something from them or that they are not listening – think again. They see and hear a lot more than you think. And they internalize and make meaning of it. Sometimes the quickest way to change the behavior of someone else is to change your own. Provide an environment where children feel physically safe and psychologically safe.

Teach your child how to regulate emotions and express anger appropriately (breathing, naming feelings, talking it out, punching a pillow, etc) for more information: (<https://www.apa.org/topics/parenting/managing-preschool-aggression>)

Make helping others a part of family tradition – whether it be donating toys, food, or clothing, making items for or visiting a nursing facility, or having a bake sale to raise money for a community organization – demonstrate the value of caring for others and being a part of the community. Do volunteer work and discuss with children. Children can partake in these activities.

What about children who have observed biological parents engaged in behaviors that you do not want them to model….such as stealing, using drugs, being dishonest/covering up drug use? Children can relearn – Modeling positive behaviors consistently, discussing actions of others without labeling parents as “bad” or being overly critical, and offering children and teens alternative ways of reacting, coping, and getting needs met in pro-social ways can help them overcome negative past experiences.

*Creation of opportunities for the child to practice moral reasoning and actions*

You tube video (3:54 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWSSPnTB6OY>

For young children, books or stories such as Aesop’s fables present opportunities to discuss morals. Talk to toddlers about sharing, about being kind and honest – praise those behaviors and provide opportunities to practice and solve problems. Don’t expect them to be perfect – they do not think abstractly like adults, but can incorporate basic rules and understand expectations. School age children and teens can be presented with ethical dilemmas and discuss how they would handle such situations. Remember that there are not always clear cut right or wrong answers and it is important to let them talk and think things out. If there are clear circumstances where you want them to behave in a certain way – explain the reason and again, let them think or talk it through. Games such as Actions and Consequences present real life situations and asks the participant to talk about what they would choose to do, what would likely happen if they made that choice and whether or not that would be a negative or positive outcome. But you can make up your own situations or use ones your teen or preteen will likely encounter – A friend offers you drugs, you see someone being bullied, a friend wants to copy your homework, you are being pressured to have sex, you see someone steal something….etc. Encourage participation in extra curricula and teamwork type of activities.

How to help them problem solve about moral dilemmas:

* Talk about the situation – what makes it hard, what factors need to be considered?
* What are the available options?
* For each option, what are the possible consequences/pros and cons?
* How will you handle the possible consequences if they happen?
* Who else, if anyone might help in making the decision?
* Making the choice and taking responsibility for the outcome.

Trainer can provide some possible examples (offered drugs, asked by a friend to lie, see someone stealing or cheating on a test….)

What teens want most from adults is to be heard – be a good listener and good sounding board.

Message to youth: There are many things in life over which you don’t have control. One thing you always have control over is who you are as a person. That might mean that you are the only one who knows, recognizes, or acknowledges that you made a good choice or a positive contribution –in fact, there may be times that others ridicule or criticize your actions – it is your opinion of yourself that matters most. And I will always love you and support you – even when slip up. We are a team and always here to help you.

Remember that mistakes will be made. Neither you nor your child is perfect. We are often faced with hard choices and may not be proud of the choices we make. Teach them what to do if they make a mistake: take responsibility, make amends, learn what to differently the next time, move on and forgive yourself. Let them know we all make mistakes. The most important thing is to learn from the situation and change behavior for the next time. Some situations ma call for the caregiver imposing a logical consequence but all situations require additional disciplinary action beyond making amends, or learning what to do next time.

Why not spanking or other harsh punishments? The goal of teaching moral behavior is that we want children to act correctly even when no one knows – in other words, good choices should be made because of an internalized sense of right and wrong – fairness and respect for other’s rights and welfare – not because of fear of punishment or getting caught. If no one saw you side swipe a car, do you just take off or do you leave a note? If no one sees you cheating, is it ok? What would you want your child to do?

What happens if a child’s behavior is concerning and persistent in spite of best efforts? What if the child does not seem to display any sense of empathy or remorse? If you are concerned, seek professional help from a trained and licensed social worker, psychologist, counselor, or child psychiatrist.

Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.

— Mahatma Gandhi

Summary of Do’s and Don’t’s

DON’T

Belittle, shame, bully, withhold affection, spank, yell, humiliate

Lecture

Label child as “bad” or “mean”

Engage in behaviors you do not want your child to copy

Expect your child (or yourself) to be perfect

DO

Provide firm, consistent, reasonable limits and expectations and guidelines: use natural and logical consequences

Have conversations with child about moral behaviors and dilemmas

Listen to your child without judgment

Teach your child problem solving skills and provide opportunities to practice

Help teach your child how to manage anger and regulate emotions

Provide a nurturing, trusting, safe environment where children feel free to talk

Acknowledge when you make a mistake and make appropriate amends

Help children learn from mistakes and make amends when appropriate

Demonstrate empathy

Do volunteer work, involve your child in helping others, be involved in community activities

Be a model to your child

Seek professional help when you have concerns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyTmeb4vFqE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahhKyEw9xUc>