

# Moral development in children

Sociology, Moral Development



**Introduction**

As with the rest of human life, morality and moral education have an outside and an inside. Seen from the outside, morality provides a way of getting along with others, and from the inside it is a way of getting along with oneself. More crudely, moral education is at once a necessary condition for social control and an indispensable means of self-realisation. Most of us, including philosophers as well as parents and educators, assume that these two functions of morality sustain each other: what is good for society is good for our kids, and vice versa. The ambitions that most parents have for their children naturally include the development of important moral dispositions. Most parents want to raise children to become persons of a certain kind, persons who possess traits that are desirable and praiseworthy, whose personalities are imbued with a strong ethical compass. In situations of radical choice we hope that our children do the right thing for the right reason, even when faced with strong inclinations to do otherwise. Moral development is concerned with the acceptance of morality which brings along certain forms of behaviour, attitudes and values in an individual. This takes place through moral education. So, moral development is closely linked to the other four domains of development that is: physical and motor, emotional, social and cognitive.

As we already know, changes do not occur abruptly but in a systematic and sequential way over a period of time. Moral development requires that the reasoning capacities of the individual become more complex. Morality is concerned with the extent to which someone conforms to the principle of goodness or rightness. However, what is right or wrong is sometimes

determined by society and need not be universal i. e. what is considered “good” in one social group can be seen as “wrong” in another one. So, moral values refer to the specific values and the common beliefs that shape human relationships in each social group.

### **The Development of Moral Reasoning**

The moral thinking of young children was described by both Piaget and Kohlberg as concrete and oriented toward punishment, respect for authority, and the maintenance of existing social rules and laws. Piaget (1932) described moral development as moving from an orientation characterised by heteronomy, or a strong respect for adult authority and rules, to an autonomous morality in later childhood in which rules are understood as social constructions formulated in social relations of cooperation among peers. According to Piaget, the young child views social rules as permanent and unchangeable, and conceptualises moral obligation in terms of strict obedience to the rules or commands of adult authorities. A morality based on adult constraint gives way in later childhood to a morality based on mutual respect, or cooperation. This progression is facilitated by the older child’s cognitive development from egocentrism to perspectivism, and by a corresponding shift in the child’s social relations from one-way relations of adult constraint to reciprocal relations of mutual respect among peers.

In *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Piaget (1932) distinguished two types of moral reasoning, each of which has a different understanding of respect, fairness, and punishment:

1. Heteronomous morality. Initially morality is based on unilateral respect for authorities and the rules they prescribe. Before pre-primary schooling, a child adopts values and socially approved manners from people in his/her surrounding. While he/she develops an inner conscience, he/she can internalize both moral and immoral principles. He/she is exposed to different learning experiences which can present acceptable or unacceptable outcomes.
2. Autonomous morality. From an autonomous perspective, morality is based on mutual respect, reciprocity, and equality among peers. Fairness is understood as mutually agreed upon cooperation and reciprocal exchange. The child also learns to understand rules according to his state and stage of cognitive development, as he/she learns to make sense of his own experiences.

Moral education helps him/her to move from egocentric, individualistic and conventional judgements to principles governed by reasoning and fairness. Morality helps the child to become self-disciplined, considerate and to learn universal moral values.

For the children, there is a period when you can say “ eating in the living room is not allowed” and they will accept it. For them, rules simply exist. At this stage, they believe that rules about conduct or rules about how to play a game are absolute and can’t be changed.

In other words, if a rule is broken, they believe that the punishment should be determined by how much damage is done. For example, a child accidentally breaks three cups. He/she will think that it is worse that

intentionally breaking one cup. In the child's eye, the punishment for the three cup offence should be greater. Thus, he/she reasons things out according to the quantity of the damage. He/she cannot understand abstract feelings such as willingness to hurt.

Similarly, Kohlberg (1981) characterised children's moral reasoning in terms of a punishment and obedience orientation. Kohlberg believed that Piaget mischaracterised the thinking of the young child as reflecting a respect for rules; Kohlberg, rather, saw young children's moral thinking as expressing a practical concern with obedience to authority in order to avoid punishment. Nonetheless, Kohlberg likewise saw the young child as prone to take the perspective of authority in moral judgments and to display a focus on the concrete consequences of moral acts and disobedience. Based on analyses of children's reasoning about moral dilemmas, Kohlberg described moral development as moving through a series of stages, in which morality is defined first in terms of punishment or obedience to authority, through a predictable level in which individuals take the perspective of the legal system and support existing laws.

## **Stages of Moral Development**

### **Piaget stages of moral development**

According to Piaget, there is close correspondence between children's cognitive and moral development. In keeping with his stage theory of cognitive development, Piaget (1932) developed a similar model of moral development

**Age 0-5 years: Pre-moral**

Little understanding of rules or morality

**Age 5-10 years: Moral realism**

Rigid belief that rules must be obeyed and that actions are judged by their consequences. Children in this stage believe that the naughtier the behaviour, the greater should be the punishment, and also that naughty behaviour will always be punished.

**Age 10+ years: Moral relativism**

Identification that people have diverse moral standards and better flexibility in moral understanding, including individuals' intentions as well as consequences of behaviour. Children in this stage know that rules can be broken, and that incorrect behaviour is not always punished. Further, they believe that punishment 'should fit the crime'.

Piaget argued that games play an important role in children's moral development as through them, children develop an understanding of how rules function and where they come from, as well as whether rules can be changed and, if so, with what consequences. He explained that children generalise this experience and understanding of the use of rules in other contexts also. He further distinguished between the practice of moral rules (moral behaviour) and the ability to explain those rules (moral understanding), with both developing separately and in parallel. According to this theory, by their early teens children have moved from a view of rules as constraints imposed by adults, to an understanding that rules are changeable, based on mutual co-operation and respect

**Kohlberg's Ideas of Moral Reasoning**

Kohlberg defined moral reasoning as judgements about right and wrong. His studies of moral reasoning are based on the use of moral dilemmas, or hypothetical situations in which people must make a difficult decision. Kohlberg defined a subject's level of moral reasoning from the reasoning used to defend his or her position when faced with a moral dilemma. He thought this is more important than the actual choice made, since the choices people make in such a dilemma aren't always clearly and certainly right. He noted that development of moral reasoning, seemed to be related to one's age. However, he also determined that the highest level of moral reasoning was not reached by all of his subjects.

**Kohlberg's stage of Moral development****Pre-conventional Level:**

At this level, the child is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but he interprets the labels in terms of either the physical or pleasure-seeking consequences of action (punishment, reward). The level is divided into the following three stages:

Stage 0: Egocentric judgement. The child makes judgements of good on the basis of what he likes and desires, and bad on the basis of what he does not like or what hurts him. He has no concept of rules to obey or conform independent of his wish.

Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation. The physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness regardless of the human meaning or value of these consequences. Avoidance of punishment

and unquestioning admiration to power are values in their own right, not in terms of respect for an underlying moral order supported by punishment and authority.

Stage 2: The instrumental relativist orientation. Right action consists of what instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms of those in the market place. Elements of fairness, reciprocity, and equal sharing are present, but they are always interpreted in a physical, practical way.

### **Conventional Level**

At this level, the individual perceives the maintenance of the expectations of his family, group, or nation as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of conformity to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively maintaining, supporting, and justifying the order and identifying with the persons or group involved in it. The level consists of the following two stages:

Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or “good boy-nice girl” orientation. Good behaviour is what pleases others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is normal behaviour. Behaviour is frequently judged by intention. One earns approval by being “nice”.

Stage 4: The “law and order” orientation. The individual is oriented toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right



behavior consists in doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

### **Post-Conventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level.**

The individual makes a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups of persons holding them apart from the individual's own identification with the group. This level has the two following stages:

Stage 5: The social-contract legalistic orientation. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general individual rights and standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, right action is a matter of personal values and opinions. The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view", but with an additional emphasis upon the possibility of changing the law in terms of rational considerations of social utility.

Stage 6: The universal ethical-principle orientation. Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles that appeal to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and regularity. These principles are abstract and ethical; they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of the human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons.

On the other hand, social learning theorists (e. g. Bandura, 1965) have approached the issue of moral development in a very different way from both Piaget and Kohlberg. Here, the emphasis is on social factors which influence moral behaviour, rather than moral understanding or reasoning (cognitive factors). Two types of learning are thought to be particularly influential on moral behaviour:

- direct learning – being rewarded (reinforced) for behaving in particular ways, and punished for behaving in certain other ways;
- observational learning – learning by observing other people being rewarded or punished for behaving in certain ways, and then behaving in the way that was rewarded.

According to social learning theory, moral behaviour – both children's and adults' -will show inconsistency across different situations, depending on the rewards or punishments applying in those situations, and will not be linked to particular ages as such.

## **Conclusion**

Social judgments that involve a moral component, however, are more variable and heterogeneous than we once supposed. This is because morality is but one component involved in the generation of social judgments in context. Such contextual social judgments entail the application of multiple knowledge systems that may be coordinated in a variety of ways. Part of what enters; into such variation are the factual assumptions, customs, and social conventions of the person's culture and society. These factors, however, are themselves reflections of systematic

and basic elements of social life. What is more, the relation between cultural values and norms, and those of the individual are reciprocal and interactive rather than unidirectional. The process of moral development involves the progressive generation of regulatory structures of justice and human welfare. These non-arbitrary aspects of morality form part of the dynamic tension that exists both within individuals and social systems inasmuch as each must balance and trade off the needs of persons and the requirements of social structure and organisation.

Whenever someone starts to discuss moral issues, he/she should bear in mind that children have not reached a full degree of cognitive development. So, one must not discuss issues that are too complex for the children's age. Simple and clear language should be used. Each illustration must be clear to them and it is better to relate examples to their everyday life.

After having set a question, children must be given sufficient time to think according to their own level of understanding and reasoning. As far as possible, children should be guided by asking them the right question in simple language. We, adults are a model to our children and we must take into consideration that our answers should not be biased in order to prevent confusion and misunderstanding in the children's minds. We should always take into consideration their views and make others think about them. Whenever a child is wrong we should correct him/her with justification. Only then, we will be able to create a healthy and lively atmosphere for good moral development.