

Fostering Goodness & Caring: Promoting Moral Development of Young Children

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Early childhood education should address the moral development of the child, especially the caring and compassionate aspects of morality. What could be more important than teaching our children a sense of caring and social responsibility? We might teach them reading, writing, math, and computer skills. We might teach them about business, history, and geography. But if we neglect to teach them to be caring and compassionate, have we really given them all they need for fulfilling their potential and achieving a sense of joy and satisfaction in their lives?

Moral Development

Some people argue that moral development and a sense of caring are values to be fostered at home rather than at school. However, the teaching of these values doesn't seem to be happening, as evidenced by the behaviors and attitudes of many adults in our society. A recent book by David Callahan (*The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, 2004) presents a volume of research data on the selfish nature of our culture today and people's willingness to "do wrong" to get ahead. As Callahan's work indicates, our current culture reflects a serious lack of social responsibility and an unhealthy compulsion to succeed at any cost. Addressing this moral crisis will take more than the assumption – or wish – that children will just naturally evolve into caring adults who choose to make socially responsible decisions.

As positive moral characteristics do not appear spontaneously (Berkowitch & Grych, 1998), addressing our cultural moral crisis will take the commitment and involvement of many elements of society, including early childhood education. Community involvement is especially important in light of the fact that "many children are not taught much about ethics and honesty at home...Worse, many parents may be caught up in the cheating culture themselves and set a negative example for their children" (Callahan, 2004, p. 286). Many educators are aware of the cultural moral crisis and feel a need to promote ethical development in the classroom (Callahan, 2004; Halverson, 2004). Determining the best way to do this, however, isn't always understood.

Morality and moral development are sometimes defined in terms of objective norms and established standards of behaviors. This view of morality often provides the basic structure for character education programs, where a set of virtues (such as honesty, kindness, courage, determination, etc.) are identified and promoted. Lawrence Kohlberg (1984), an internationally recognized researcher and expert in the field of moral development, used the term "a bag of virtues" in discussing the limitations of this traditional framework.

Kohlberg and others who view moral development in a more developmental and constructivist perspective believe that "goodness"

is developed from the inside of an individual rather than being imposed from the outside (as the traditional character education model suggests). They recognize, as Halverson (2004) says, that, “the simplistic strategy of directly teaching ethics does not work” (p. 157). Robert Coles, in *The Moral Life of Children* (1986), speaks to this same misunderstanding: “It is a mistake to think of morality as a set of external standards that adults somehow foist upon an unknowing or unwilling child...most of our current moral education efforts fail precisely because of this mistaken yet pervasive assumption” (p. 2). Alfie Kohn (1997) offers a similar critical assessment of character education in schools. He feels that character education in most schools is a form of indoctrination in which absolutes of a moral action are instilled or transmitted. An alternative proposed by Kohn (1997) is to involve children in actively assessing certain behaviors against real situations and allowing them to make moral judgments accordingly.

Developmentalists, such as Kohlberg, propose that the process of attaining moral maturity occurs over time if conditions are favorable for such growth. They also believe that a child’s moral maturity is directly related to the way she thinks about concepts such as justice, rights, equality, and human welfare. Over time and through a variety of social interactions, children come to develop their own understandings of these concepts. Thus, their sense of “goodness” is constructed through their own thinking about their experiences and through dialogue with others about what these experiences mean (Nucci, 2001). Children’s sense of goodness is also fostered through encouragement offered by significant adults in their lives. One principal of an elementary school in Florida offers such encouragement at the end of his daily announcements by saying something like, “Remember, children, be kind to one another” (Comora, 2004).

Kohlberg’s theory of moral development builds on Jean Piaget’s work, which focused primarily on cognitive development. According to Piaget (1965), children construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world through interactions with the environment. Such knowledge includes children’s understandings about what is right and what is wrong (Piaget, 1965). Moral development and cognitive development are thus closely intertwined. Moral reasoning is, in fact, considered to be one of the central aspects (or “building blocks”) of moral functioning (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998). Being a “good” person, however, involves more than having the cognitive understanding of what is right and what is wrong. Other central aspects of moral functioning include empathy, conscience, and altruism (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998).

According to the constructivist theory of development, these central aspects of moral functioning cannot be given to children – but they can be fostered. We know that we can’t give young children an understanding of such concepts as cause and effect or object permanence, yet we purposefully provide experiences that promote such understandings. In a similar way, if we want to foster goodness in children, we would do well to provide the kinds of experiences that promote moral functioning – and we would do so starting at a young age (Callahan, 2004; Noddings, 2002a).

Promoting Moral Development

The constructivist model of moral development suggests that we should avoid giving children a list of do's and don'ts (or virtues and vices) to guide their behavior. Yet we all know that children must learn to act in certain socially acceptable ways to get along well in society and to maintain a healthy sense of self. They must learn, for example, to follow certain rules of etiquette while eating, to use the bathroom appropriately, and to express their feelings of anger and frustration without hurting others. While it is important for children to learn and abide by these "rules," teaching such rules isn't what moral education is all about. Just as morality involves more than thinking, so does it involve more than a set of behaviors. We may be able to get children to do certain things or "to behave themselves" as we want them to, but that doesn't mean they've developed a sense of goodness or morality (Coles, 1997). Morality runs much deeper than behaving according to the rules set down by others. Morality includes a sense of justice, compassion, and caring about the welfare of others. It also includes perspective-taking ability – that is, the ability to discern how someone might be thinking or feeling.

While some people may think that preschool children aren't cognitively or emotionally ready to be concerned about anyone but themselves, research indicates otherwise (Callahan, 2004; Wyckoff, 2000). Caring behavior becomes evident during the first year of life. Many infants show signs of distress when another baby cries, and toddlers become uneasy when another child gets hurt or is punished. Some two-year-olds even display the same emotion as the child being punished (Wyckoff, 2000). Such behaviors indicate a sense of caring and the ability to take the perspective of someone other than self. Helping children grow in this perspective-taking ability should be a major goal of moral education at the early childhood level. Following are six guidelines and suggestions on how to promote moral functioning with young children, especially in relation to caring for others.

1. Help children understand the reason behind rules, especially rules relating to such moral concerns as justice, fairness, and other aspects of human welfare. Discuss the reasons why one behavior is preferable to another (e.g., sharing a box of crayons is preferable to pushing another child away from the art area). In discussing these contrasting behaviors with a young child, the focus should be on how what the child does affects someone else (e.g., sharing crayons makes a play partner happy while pushing the child away makes the other child sad). Such discussions foster empathy, higher levels of moral reasoning, and altruism (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Wyckoff, 2000). These types of discussions also help children develop perspective-taking abilities in that it focuses on how someone else might think or feel in a given situation (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Wyckoff, 2000).

Discussions with children should take the form of "true dialogue" as described by Noddings (2002a). True dialogue occurs, Noddings says, when participants engage "in mutual exploration, a search for meaning, or the solution of some problem" (p. 287). In true dialogue, teachers refrain from giving all the right answers. They solicit, listen to, and seriously consider the child's point of view. Such interactions

never become just a “telling session” on the part of the adult. In fact, some of the most effective discussions for promoting moral development occur between child and child versus child and adult (Nucci, 2001). The adult, however, will often serve as a facilitator in child-to-child discussions, especially on issues of morality.

2. Match your response to conflict situations to the children’s level of cognitive and social development. It’s important to remember that cognitively young children have differing understandings of the social and physical world than do older children and adults. Young children are egocentric and will thus judge events and behaviors on how such happenings directly affect them. They will find it difficult to simultaneously take into account their own view of things with the perspective of someone else.

If four-year-old Alex is playing with toys in the sandbox and doesn’t want to stop playing, it’s not likely that he will automatically be sympathetic to the fact that Lisa, another, has been waiting for ten minutes to have her turn. We, as adults, need to understand Alex’s position. This doesn’t mean that we allow Alex to play as long as he pleases. It does suggest that we establish rules or procedures to protect the interests and rights of all the children and that the reasons behind these rules are shared with the children. In fact, in many cases, it’s best to develop the rules with the children. The involvement of children in making rules promotes their moral development and fosters their self-esteem (DeVries & Zan, 2003). Developing a rule about time limits for using the sand box, for example, would include a discussion with the children about how most children enjoy the sand toys in the sand box and about how they feel sad when they don’t get a turn. While having and enforcing the time limit rule may not result in Alex suddenly empathizing with the other child’s feelings, he should be reminded that there is a rule and that the rule was developed to protect the rights and feelings of all the children.

According to Kohlberg (1984), “following the rules” represents the first level of moral reasoning – a level characterized by judgments being based on concrete, individual perspectives and typical of how young children think. Children at this level are motivated to follow the rules to avoid punishment and/or to get rewards. Thus, they follow the rules when they can see that it is to their benefit to do so – that is, they get a reward or avoid negative consequences. Alex should thus be praised for following the rule when he gives up the sand toys, as this praise may motivate him to follow rules in the future. Yet, praise for following the rule should be paired with a comment about how his behavior affected his classmate. To promote Alex’s moral development, a teacher might say “Thank you, Alex, for giving Lisa her turn. Do you see how happy that made her feel?”

By talking about how someone else feels in relation to a specific action, we encourage children to understand and care about the feelings of others. Such caring represents an added dimension to Kohlberg’s model of moral development. Kohlberg emphasized the concepts of fairness and justice as critical aspects of moral functioning. More recent work on moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002b) calls attention to the morality of care, as well. In

Kohlberg's model, we have the injunction not to treat others unfairly (that is, to do what is just); in this newer model, we have the added injunction not to turn away from someone in need (that is, to show that we care when someone else is hurting or needs something) (Nucci, 2001).

3. Attend to the victim first when one child hurts another. It's always important to focus on the feelings of others when dealing with hurtful interpersonal conflicts or transgressions of established classroom rules. Instead of focusing on the concern that "the rules have been broken," we should focus on the outcome of how "someone has been hurt" (or was put in danger of being hurt). This response not only attends to the victim's needs but also helps the offending child develop a sense of morality, as caring about the welfare of others is critical to moral functioning.

4. Use children's literature to share examples of caring. Early childhood educators should be aware that using children's literature to foster caring in children is both supported and criticized in the professional literature. The well-established practice of bibliotherapy – where carefully chosen literature is used to help people solve problems – certainly supports the idea. Yet, there are others who criticize the practice of using "moral stories" to build character. They suggest that labeling a complex set of behaviors with one word like "respect" or "loyalty" does not help children understand its meaning (Narvaez, 2002). They also suggest that the use of children's literature in this way is not consistent with constructivist theory – in that it represents an effort to give children a sense of morality rather than providing them with experiences to develop their own understandings about what it means to do the right thing (Narvaez, 2001, 2002).

While it's important to keep these criticisms in mind, it's also wise to refer back to the idea of interactive discussion as an effective strategy in helping children construct their views of morality. Children's literature often serves as an excellent stimulus for such discussion. Rather than just reading a book from cover to cover with children, teachers should help children "uncover" the meaning and personal implications of the story through thoughtful discussion. Such discussion should be based on the understanding that books can't give children morality but that they can serve as stimuli for meaningful social interaction. Readers should be reminded that morality arises out of social interactions and social relationships (Coles, 1997, 1986). (See page 20 for suggested children's books for fostering caring in young children.)

5. Include animals in the classroom and involve children in the care of the animals. Tending to the needs of animals requires children to give thought and attention to something outside of themselves and supports the practice of caring (Wilson, 2001). The professional literature suggests that as children care for animals, they become more caring towards people as well (Rud & Beck, 2000; Wilson, 2001). Related research also indicates that as children learn to treat animals with care and respect, they become less likely to treat humans in a violent, disrespectful way (Lockwood & Ascione, 1998; Wilson, 2001).

Thus, while bringing animals into the classroom requires careful thought, planning and commitment, the benefits to children suggest that the effort is indeed worthwhile (Dickstein, 2000; Wilson, 2001).

6. Model, encourage, and reward acts of caring. Children need to see others engaged in acts of kindness and expressions of caring. There are many opportunities for teachers to put this in practice throughout the day. For example, if one child has been absent for several days because of illness, you might suggest making a get-well card for her. It's also important to observe children's behavior closely and note any acts of kindness and caring. Children should then be praised when they show empathy for others. Teachers should also suggest ways in which children can practice acts of kindness in their daily routines – for example, holding the door for each other, sharing desired materials, helping when someone has a “mess” to clean up, etc.

Conclusion

Helping children achieve success has long been recognized as one of the goals of early childhood education. Defining the meaning of success, however, isn't always easy. Some see success as getting good grades in school and getting a good job after graduation. Good grades and good jobs, however, don't always lead to the practice of “goodness” and a sense of fulfillment. Ralph Waldo Emerson, on the other hand, defines the nature of success differently: “Successful people live well, laugh often, and love much. They've filled a niche and accomplished tasks so as to leave the world better than they found it, while looking for the best in others and giving the best they have.” Perhaps it's Emerson's vision of success that we should keep in mind as we plan educational programs and activities for our young children.