

Helping Teens Answer the Question "Who Am I?": Moral Development in Adolescents¹

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The journey from childhood to adolescence is very challenging. Between the ages of 10 and 17 there are major changes in physical, cognitive, social, and moral development. The major task for adolescents is to establish their self-identity. By determining—as best they can—a sense of who they are, they attempt to move into a group that reflects or reinforces this self-identity. The group allows them to feel that they stand out from the crowd. This phase of development allows the adolescent to search for their sense of self. This is in order to answer the increasingly important question that they could not consider in earlier stages of development: "*Who am I?*"

Moral Development

Adolescence is filled with experiences and decisions that relate to moral development. A few important aspects of this phase of development are moral internalization, moral construction, and self-control. Adolescents must rely on these skills in order to make good decisions.

Teens are faced with many moral dilemmas daily. They use their knowledge about human relationships (how to interact with others) and societal order (recognized boundaries and rules) to help them negotiate these dilemmas. This knowledge increases throughout adolescence as youth experiment with various roles, relationships, and activities in order to determine their comfort zones.

Moral development has three components: an emotional component, a cognitive component, and a behavioral component. When youth witness or cause another's distress, a typical reaction is to empathize (identify with the other person) or feel guilty. These emotions promote morality through the adoption of social norms in response to emotions. As youth learn to think about their social experiences, they develop social understanding, which allows them to make judgments about whether actions are right or wrong. As youth experience these morally related thoughts and feelings, the chance increases that they will act in agreement with them.

As adolescents move toward the higher stages of moral development, moral thought and action become integrated. Education plays a part here, since developing an understanding of moral dilemmas requires that adolescents reflect on higher-level abstract principles and values, many of which are learned, not intuitive. The development of moral reasoning leads youth to prosocial values (values that benefit others and society), as well as to the reflection of empathy, behavioral norms, and abstract values in their behavior. The self-regulation process continues to improve through moral development into adulthood.

There are theories that explain how these three interrelated components (emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) work together, but this article will not explore the various theories. Instead, it will focus on the stages of moral development in general, as a foundation for future articles on various aspects of moral development in specific contexts.

Moral Internalization

This part of moral development relates to the process of adopting societal standards for right action as one's own. This actually begins around age 1½, when toddlers learn to model a variety of prosocial acts, and moves toward internalization in early childhood (3–6 years), after children begin to experience feelings of guilt following misdeeds.

These basic societal standards become internalized around ages 7–11. From age 12 to early adulthood, adolescents experience moral dilemmas, and need to use moral thought and action as they move toward the higher stages of processing hypothetical responses. As they reflect on abstract principles and values, they advance in prosocial moral reasoning skills, reflecting empathic feelings, norms, and abstract values.

Moral Construction

Starting around ages 3–6, moral construction begins to occur. It starts when a child begins to make moral judgments, and eventually leads to matters of personal choice when applied to familiar experiences. This occurs as ideas about the legitimacy of authority figures are formed. Moral reasoning is somewhat self-serving in this stage. Later, at ages 7–11, responses to moral dilemmas focus on rewards, punishment, and the power of authority figures, while matters of personal choice and distinctions between social conventions extend to unfamiliar experiences. The concept of "fairness" is adapted to suit different situations, while prosocial moral reasoning reflects concern with others' needs and approval. From adolescence to adulthood, conventional responses to moral dilemmas that emphasize relationships and order in society increase, while moral thought and action become integrated. In later stages of development, prosocial moral reasoning begins to reflect empathic feelings, societal norms, and abstract values.

Self-Control

Starting around age 1½–2, toddlers learn compliance and how to delay gratification. Their new ability to speak and communicate fosters the beginnings of self-control. By ages 3–6 (preschool age), self-control is improving further. Children will benefit from the guidance of adults who can provide strategies to help them learn this valuable skill, which will later transform into a flexible capacity for moral self-regulation. In middle childhood (around ages 7–11), these strategies expand, along with cognitive and social competencies. Children begin to understand which self-control strategies are effective and why they work. Moral self-regulation continues to improve from the age of 12 through adulthood.

How Parents and Agents Can Encourage Moral Development

Given their important role in the lives of children and adolescents, both parents and Extension agents can help encourage positive moral development. Here are some simple ideas to help youth develop their identity as moral beings.

Encourage and reward good conduct

Young children do not inherently understand the emotions of others or how their own actions can affect them. It is up to the adults in their lives to encourage them to learn about this fact of life. To assist in conscience development, parents and Extension agents must help children notice others' feelings, especially negative feelings caused by their own misbehavior. They should also provide an age-appropriate explanation of what is happening and how the child should act. This gives youth an understanding of social standards and a reason to follow them. Youth who are provided with this type of support will be less likely to transgress in the future. As a follow-up, children and adolescents who are observed engaging in desirable behaviors should be reinforced with affection, approval, and other rewards.

Let children know how to act

Children and adolescents are constantly watching those around them, especially the adults who are most present and significant in their lives. It is, therefore, extremely important for parents and agents to model the kind of actions they want youth to engage in. Because children observe and imitate the behavior of adults, adults must be sure to demonstrate consistently appropriate behavior at all times. Berk (2006) suggests that adolescents will be more likely to imitate a model who is warm and responsive, competent and powerful, and who demonstrates consistency between assertions and behaviors. Parents and Extension agents who try to embody these characteristics will be in a better position to positively shape the behavior of the youth around them and, thus, to enhance their moral development.

Find alternative activities

An important part of moral development is resisting temptation and delaying gratification. Developing these skills allows adolescents to eventually become successful adults – professionally, personally, and emotionally. One method of encouraging and refining self-control is to help youth, particularly young children, distract themselves with alternate activities. For example, singing songs or making up stories can help children wait longer for a desirable reward. Teaching youth to find ways to patiently resist temptation and delay gratification aids in the development of self-control and moral self-regulation, which allows an individual to self-monitor and adjust his/her actions in response to opportunities to violate important inner standards. As they mature into adolescents, they will use these strategies for self-control when confronted with moral decisions to make about participating in risk behaviors. Moral self-regulation must develop slowly and deliberately during childhood with constant positive reinforcements if they are to be able to navigate safely through adolescence and into adulthood.

Be consistent in punishment

Although its usefulness may be limited, it is sometimes necessary to employ appropriate punishment when raising or working with youth. Harsh punishment, such as yelling, criticizing, or physical force, should never be used. Tactics like time-out or withdrawal of privileges, however, can play a helpful role in moral development. To make these techniques more effective, parents and Extension agents must be consistent. If, in response to a certain behavior, adolescents are sometimes corrected and sometimes allowed to continue to act in that way, they will become confused, and the unwanted behavior will persist. This is particularly evident and dangerous when the behavior is aggressive. Remember that self-control is governed by two processing systems: an emotional, reactive “hot” system that eventually is dominated by a cognitive, reflective “cool” system. When it gets out of balance, aggression is more likely to appear. By being consistent in punishment, compliance will become part of their learning about self-control and self-regulation until they can consistently demonstrate responsible behavior and social problem solving.