Moral Development in Children

Helping Children Build a Conscience

Most of us who live in this culture are all too familiar with a growing number of events and stories involving children and teens that commit crimes. The Columbine tragedy has left us with a deep sense of sadness as well as horror about what can happen when children grow up without a secure sense of being valued, and with an inability to feel connected to those around them. The news is full of stories about children who have infringed on the rights of others, sometimes very seriously. We are witnessing a growing phenomenon in which unconscionable acts perpetrated by children and teens are landing them in adult court, and often, adult prisons, sometimes for life! Certainly the media has exaggerated these incidents in our minds, yet we cannot deny the terrible human waste and suffering that is experienced on some level by all of us when these incidents occur. This is a rather somber beginning for this article, but timely in the sense that it is more important than ever to make sure that in our work as parents, we do our very best to help our children develop a full and operating conscience. Their happiness and self-fulfillment, along with the health of our society, depend upon it.

When Does One's Conscience Develop?

Before launching into this discussion, it is necessary to come up with some rudimentary definition of what we mean when we talk about one's conscience. Generally, people link having a conscience with knowing the difference between right and wrong, being able to empathize with others, feeling remorse when causing an other's pain, and having the capacity to inhibit behavior that is unlawful or unethical. In other words, we can conduct ourselves according to the basic laws and social conventions of our society while at the same time promote the well being of our fellow man. This definition focuses on two basic categories, one of which has to do with what is right or just, and other which has to do with our connection to others in positive and nurturing ways. So how do we get there? And more important, do we naturally develop a conscience as we grow and develop?

This is a question that has fueled the nature vs. nurture debate for many years. In fact, there are psychologists who focus more on cognitive (mental) development (Lawrence Kohlberg and Piaget) as the primary factor that influences moral development, and those who focus more on social interaction (social interaction theory) as the primary factor. There is yet another psychologist, Carol Gilligan, who has conducted studies that show that there are differences in the ways in which boys and girls develop morally. Boys are more focused on what is right or just, and girls focus more on the sense of human connectedness and caring as the key factors that guide moral decisions. The truth is that all of these theories have merit, and for parents, it is a good idea to be acquainted with them all.

In terms of the question "when", we can say that the full development of one's conscience can't really occur until one has the capacity for abstract (hypothetical) thinking. Abstract thinking begins developing in early childhood, but gets into full swing around the age of nine and becomes more refined around the age of twelve. The reason this is so important is that it allows one to consider ethical situations in terms of abstract ideas. In other words, we can see how what we learned during a previous experience might apply to another experience that is similar, but not exactly the same. We can consider all the possible solutions to a problem and weigh them in our minds before making a decision. Most importantly, we can see how our own actions might affect those around us before we act. Abstract thinking provides the means for a fuller capacity to empathize with others because we can mentally put ourselves in the other person's place and imagine what it would be like. That being said, we certainly know that there are many teens and adults far past the age of twelve that don't appear to have a conscience at all. This is very true, and the reason has more to do with the way in which a conscience is developed rather than merely cognitive development. Cognitive growth just supplies the capacity.

One's conscience is formed basically through three processes that take place during the early and middle years, and are refined during adolescence. These are the processes of identification with parents, instruction and training, and interactions with one's environment.

The Process of Identification

Identification is a subtle process that begins soon after birth. We're all familiar with the saying "Monkey see, monkey do." In a rather simplistic way, this statement sums up what is meant by identification. Using more psychological jargon, it means the process by which the young child imitates and internalizes the characteristics of his or her parents during the formative years. For our purposes here, the formative years begin at birth and extend up into adolescence during which time one forms a basic identity and sense of self. The identity formed is usually a confluence of characteristics that come from the parents, extended family, school or educational setting, and community environment. We can even say that the larger culture one is born into and grows up in has a significant influence on our personality development. Identification is the method used to internalize and make one's own certain psychological characteristics ranging from the way we think about things to the way we relate to others, or even to the kinds of ideals we aspire to as we move toward the adult world.

As parents, you have the greatest impact on how your child develops, and especially how he or she develops a conscience. The process begins with the initial attachment that is formed between you and your child soon after birth. The strength and quality of this attachment establishes the very foundation on which a conscience is eventually built. In short, children who don't feel that they are loved and cared for on a consistent basis by a parent will have some difficulty in developing empathy at a later age when he is able to begin to discriminate between his needs and those of others. If his own needs for love and dependency haven't been met, then he will be consumed by trying to get them fulfilled at the expense of others.

As children move through childhood, the initial attachment expands into a more complex process of identification. It takes two different forms. On the one hand, the child directly imitates the characteristics of the parents. Obvious examples are copying certain mannerisms, styles of speech, methods for doing things, or any kind of habitual behavior that is often experienced by the child through observation. As we said in the beginning, "Monkey see, monkey do." The second form of identification is more about how children experience their parents as opposed to how they imitate them. It has to do with the way the parents relate to the child. For example, if parents are primarily attentive, respectful, and nurturing, the child will internalize these characteristics as the way in which he should relate to others. Actually, growing up with a young child is very often like looking in a mirror in many ways. "But my child is very different from me," you say. Your children definitely have their own temperaments and personality characteristics, some of which can be quite different from yours; but how they learn to relate to others, how they learn to operate in the world, how they learn to conduct themselves around others - all of these are developed through the process of identification with parents, especially during the earlier years between birth and 8 or 9. If you think about it, that is a very sobering idea. It means that who you are and how you relate to your child will have a profound effect not only how they form a conscience, but on how they develop overall. The statement "Do as I say, not as I do!" can never hold up. It might confuse, and certainly it does since it offers a double message, but children ultimately will do as you do.

The main things to remember in regard to the process of identification is that you must spend adequate time with your child that is focused on enhancing your relationship, building good attachment, fostering a sense of belonging, and communicating love and caring. I can't emphasize this point enough. If you do not spend adequate quality time on a regular basis, you can almost predict that your child will have problems developing the capacity to empathize with others. If you ignore your child's emotional pain, they in turn will have difficulty in feeling remorse when they cause others pain. Further, your attempts at instruction and training (which we will review next) will not be as successful as you would hope. Keep in mind that children initially behave themselves and develop what's called pro-social behavior (helping behavior) because they care about what you think about them and how you feel about them. You know that you yourself are more likely to be able to sustain a caring relationship with someone who you feel respects and cares about you and has your best interest at heart.

Instruction and Training

This is the nuts and bolts of developing a conscience that builds on the foundation of a good attachment. It is equally important. Children do not usually just develop a sense of right and wrong from hanging around their parents. You must also give specific instructions and training. How is this done? Very broadly, it begins by setting limits. You can love and nurture your children, but if you do not set limits or modify non-social behaviors, they will most likely grow up having a sense of entitlement, which leads them to feel they can step on the rights and needs of others in order to satisfy themselves. Permissive parenting, in this case, can be deadly. More specifically, it is necessary to discuss in detail the differences between right and wrong as situations present themselves. This should be done on a level the child can understand. For example, a four-year-old would simply need to be given a very concrete description of the expected behavior with a very cursory statement about the reasoning behind it. As the youngster gets older, the discussions around why things are right or wrong, or just, can become more elaborate. This is because the older child has a more developed cognition and can understand and think about these things.

Finally, there needs to be consistent instruction around the issue of empathy. For a young child, this is usually something as simple as

mentioning that a behavior hurts someone's feelings. Again, as the youngster progresses in age you should elaborate the notion of what it feels like to be in the other person's place by drawing your child's attention to situations that are similar in which their feelings have been hurt or not adequately considered. At the same time that you are providing these instructions and training, you are also modeling the correct behavior so that the youngster understands it on both an intellectual and experiential level at the same time.

Interactions with the Environment

As youngsters approach 8 ½ to 9 years of age, they begin to take some of their instruction from others in the environment such as teachers, dance instructors, coaches, friends' parents, and of course, their peers. They are beginning to develop the capacity to discriminate more between the various shadings in ideas and behavior, and they notice that some of the more influential people in their environment have slightly different twists on morality. With the development of hypothetical thinking, they can now test things out in their minds. Issues begin to have more than one side.

The environment can also assist in reinforcing instructions and training given out by parents. For example, the school may reinforce that lying and cheating are not acceptable behaviors. Or standards of behavior emphasized by a church youth group may reinforce the lessons regarding empathy that parents have worked to instill. Conversely, the environment can also work in direct conflict with the definitions of morality offered at home. Certainly this is true of some of the offerings by the media whether it be television, film, or the internet. In this case, home instruction has to consider these influences and moderate them while also discussing them in detail. As a rule, parents of younger children should be very selective about the media their children are exposed to, and spend a good deal of time examining the effects and counteracting them if need be. A solid relationship between parents and children make this task much easier and much more successful. On a positive note, media can be selected to augment the developing child's conscience. For younger children, fantasy stories and fairy tails often promote moral lessons and empathetic behavior. These stories can be quite influential as they are remembered and repeated and often remain in the mind through adulthood. So read a story to your child tonight. It's a perfect way to teach about empathy and increase the bond between the two of you at the same time. You could say it's a hole-in-one for building a conscience.

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