Understanding Gray: Moral Development in Gifted Children

Rodney Jones
Coordinator, Advanced Academics
Rodney.Jones@austinisd.org
512-414-2031
Did you break it?

Why can’t I just take it?

She won’t share!
Is Santa coming tonight?

Why did you say you didn’t have change?

What’s the right thing to do?

Do you like it?

He hit me first!
Definitions of Moral Development

The ability to reason about universal principles of justice and fairness (moral judgment).

The ability to empathize with and act to alleviate others’ suffering (compassion).

So...

Is a morally developed person one who feels strongly about moral issues...or understands moral issues...or acts ethically when dealing with other people?
Moral development is desirable for all individuals, not just the gifted population.

Gifted individuals tend to grapple with moral issues at an earlier age than their peers and more often and with more intensity.

We need to be able to recognize the moral concerns of children and provide appropriate guidance and feedback.

Whether we are addressing feelings, thinking, or behavior, we the passport for growth and development. It is up to us to assist children to arrive at their destination intact and secure with a strong ethical code.
A woman was near death from a unique kind of cancer. There is a drug that might save her. The drug costs $4,000 per dosage.

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.

He asked the doctor scientist who discovered the drug for a discount or let him pay later. But the doctor scientist refused.

Should Heinz break into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?
“For one thing, a human life is worth more than money, and if the druggist only makes $1,000, he is still going to live, but if Heinz doesn’t steal the drug, his wife is going to die. Because the druggist can get a thousand dollars later from rich people with cancer, but Heinz can’t get his wife again. Because people are all different and so you couldn’t get Heinz’s wife again.”
Jake was also asked if Heinz should steal the drug if he doesn’t love his spouse?

Jake replies that he should, saying that not only is there a ‘a difference between hating and killing,’ but also if Heinz where caught, ‘the judge would probably think it was the right thing to do.’ Asked about the fact that, in stealing, Heinz would be breaking the law, he says that ‘the laws have mistakes, and you can’t go writing up a law for everything that you can imagine.’

Considering the law and recognizing its function in maintaining social order, the judge, Jake asserts, “should give Heinz the lightest possible sentence.” Jake considers the law to be man-made, subject to error and change.
“Well, I don’t think so. I think there might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money or make a loan or something, but he really shouldn’t steal the drug—but his wife shouldn’t die either”.

When Amy is asked why she should not steal the drug, her response is:

“If he stole the drug, he might save his wife, then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn’t get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So, they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make the money”.

The Shift in Imagery: A Case Study:
Amy and Jake, two eleven-year-old students
Asked whether or not Heinz loves his wife she maintained that he shouldn’t steal or let her die. And even if it was a stranger dying, Heinz should still try to save her life, but not steal the drug.

When asked again why Heinz shouldn’t steal she simply restates her position, “Because it’s not right…if he took it, he might not know how to give it to his wife, and so his wife might still die.”

She assumes that if the druggist were to see the deathly situation, he would surely want to help him save her. If they would just talk about it, surely they could come to an understanding.

Lastly, she sees the problem being a failure of the druggist: “it is not right for someone to die when their life could be saved”.

The Shift in Imagery: A Case Study: Amy and Jake, two eleven-year-old students
- Psychologist, served as professor at University of Chicago and Harvard University
- Expanded upon Piaget's theories of moral development; 1958 dissertation
- Six developmental stages
- Used the Heinz Dilemma in studies—concentration on the form of the response rather than the actual answer
### Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development & The Heinz Dilemma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Stage 1</strong></th>
<th><strong>Stage 2</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Punishment - Obedience</strong></td>
<td><strong>Individualism and Exchange</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It is wrong because he could get in trouble for stealing.</em></td>
<td><em>It is not wrong because by stealing the drug he is helping his wife (if his wife provides him with happiness then the pleasure seeking principle is exhibited).</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Stage 3</strong></th>
<th><strong>Stage 4</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good Interpersonal Relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>Maintaining the Social Order</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>It’s not wrong if he did it for the love he has towards his wife (his role as her husband justified his stealing).</em></td>
<td><em>It is wrong because he broke the law (respect for the law and rules is exhibited in this response).</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Stage 5 and 6** |
| **Universal Principles** |
| *Here the possible responses become a little cloudy since the individual begins to question the law of man. The responses are made based on ones' own ethical principles.* |

**Self-Centered** *(Selfish Obedience)*

**Conformity** *(Conforming to traditions, majority)*

**Principled** *(Internal commitment to moral principles beyond conformity)*
“Ethics of Justice”
Voice

Justice/gratification
Factual
Right/wrong & rule-based logic
Less caring
Matter of fact (practical)
Present focus
Strict rules
Black and white
Independence
Rigid
Taking a commanding role

“Ethics of Care”
Voice

Reason
Emotional
Impact on relationships
Compassion, care, concern
Rationalizing away facts (abstract)
Future focus
Making exceptions
Shades of gray
Dependence
People oriented
Shying away from decision-making
Kazimierz Dabrowski

- Polish psychiatrist, neurologist, clinical psychologist, pedagogue, psychotherapist
- Godfather of Intellectual Giftedness Research
- Based research on Piaget’s stages of development with a focus on emotion as a guide to making life decisions
Positive Disintegration – a breakdown of existing schema(s) of understanding self in relation to world in order to create morally advanced, sophisticated schema.
Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration

The way things are
The way things ought to be

Potential for Growth
Conflict
Inner
Rorey (6 years old), befriended Carl (12 years old), who was developmentally disabled.

Other children teased and tormented Carl, especially Todd (12 years old). Rorey stood up to Todd and the other 12-year-olds, though they were all bigger and twice Rorey’s age. Todd was surprised and stopped teasing Carl.

When asked why he helped Carl, Rorey stated that he knew that Carl needed a friend, and it was the right thing to do to be his friend and defend him. He felt teasing others was wrong.
On a shopping expedition, three-year-old Chrissy told her mother that she did not need any new clothes.

She also would not allow her mother to buy her toys even though her mother had planned several purchases with money Chrissy had recently received from relatives. The only purchase Chrissy would allow that day was a pair of shoes since she had outgrown her old ones.

Instead, she wanted the money to be given to the poor.
Behaviors exhibited...

- Higher degree of altruism
- Higher level of moral reasoning
- Highly developed conscience
- Higher degree of sensitivity to moral issues
Asynchronous Development

- Intellectual
- Emotional
- Physical
- Social
Intellectual: strong signs of analysis and synthesis, theoretical thinking, probing questions, learning, problem solving

Emotional: intensity of feeling: complex emotions and feelings, extremes of emotion, sensitivity, identification with the feelings of others, difficulty adjusting to change.

Psychomotor: surplus of energy, restless, curious

Sensual: sensory and aesthetic pleasure

Imaginational: vivid fantasy life, spontaneous imagery, sensitive to imaginary realities

... AND IF YOU DON'T RECYCLE, SUZIE, THE EARTH WILL HEAT UP, THE OCEANS WILL EXPLODE AND BOILING RAIN WILL SCALD ALL THE BABY ANIMALS... ANY QUESTIONS?
Gifted children have better-developed decision power, strong analytical ability, and developing self-realization.

Parents should foster a child’s shades of gray.

Parents should appreciate the positive behavior of your children without any conditions. (Does not have to be a “reward.”)

…and 20 + 1 Ways to Foster Moral Leadership
Moral Development in Gifted Children

Rodney Jones
Coordinator, Advanced Academics
Rodney.Jones@austinisd.org
512-414-2031

Understanding Gray