



## Moral Development

As defined, moral development is the ability to reason about universal principles of justice and fairness (moral judgment) and the process through which children develop proper attitudes and behaviors toward other people in society, based on social and cultural norms, rules, and laws.

Moral development is a concern for every parent. Teaching a child to distinguish right from wrong and to behave accordingly is a goal for most parents. Gifted children tend to show evidence of moral sensitivity at an early age. They have more care of others and a desire to relieve others of pain and suffering. Compared to other children in their age group, gifted children have an advanced ability to understand the abstractions of justice and fairness.

Psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, expanded on Jean Piaget's theories of moral development, proposing six different developmental stages in moral development. Kohlberg's theory focused on the use of reason to draw conclusions about what ought to be done to achieve justice and fairness in a particular situation, rather than the outcome of each dilemma.

### **Kohlberg's Individual Moral Development Stages.**

**Stage 1:** Identify "bad" acts and those that are "against the law" as prohibited by external punishments.

**Stage 2:** See right and wrong established by how they benefit the parties involved. "Fair" equals good.

**Stage 3:** Reflect a concern for the opinion of others; viewed as the "good girl/boy" stage.

**Stage 4:** Show concern for social order. Laws are seen as agreed upon duties that should be followed for the social good.

**Stage 5:** Recognize differing but equal moral values, holding certain principles as non relative in the interest of fulfilling a kind of social contract.

**Stage 6:** Embrace a set of universal and self chosen ethics. The law is based on such ethics and should therefore be followed.

*(Adapted from Lovecky & Deirdre, 1997.)*

While moral development is desirable for all individuals, the gifted grapple with moral issues at an earlier age than their peers, more often, and with more intensity. We need to recognize the moral concerns of children and provide appropriate guidance and feedback. Whether we are addressing feelings, thinking, or behavior, we are our children's passport for growth and development. It is up to us to assist children in arriving at their destination intact and secure with a strong ethical code.

### **Fostering Moral Development:**

- Have children examine values, ethical principles, and philosophical systems.
- Give them opportunities to discuss ethical issues and come to their own decisions.
- Offer them the opportunity to construct their own moral dilemmas.
- Provide opportunities for them to internalize caring values by encouraging children to recognize "service opportunities" in the school, home, and community.
- Believe in their ideals. Don't try to talk them out of their "unrealistic" expectations.
- Help them learn how to set priorities so they discover their most important ideas.
- Support their courage to stand up for their convictions, despite the blow to self-esteem they may sustain from others.
- Give them books to read and films to watch to familiarize themselves with moral leaders so they have appropriate role models. Explore with them humanitarian values and the lives of individuals dedicated to service.
- Assist them in designing projects related to social and moral issues.
- Help them critically examine the historical development of philosophies and the effects of these values on the development of societies.
- Introduce them to the contributions of the inconspicuous and unsung who show admirable qualities and lead worthwhile lives.
- Examine with them the issues shown on television and in other media sources.
- Focus on different viewpoints in everyday interactions; have children share their feelings about interactions, events, or activities.
- Have children establish their own code of rules for behavior.
- Involve them in activities in which children learn to interact cooperatively with each other, respect each other's rights and gain a sense of social responsibility.
- Have children participate in decision-making with everyday issues.
- Model caring behaviors.
- Help children become activists by engaging them in the study and solution of real-life problems and issues.
- Give children opportunities to think about their role in the world. What impact could they make? What impact do they make? What impact does the world have on their lives?

*(Adapted from Silverman, 1993.)*