



## **Moral Development in Children**

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In many of my Stepping Stones parent groups, the parents ask questions regarding their child's moral development. Does my child really understand the difference between right and wrong? How can I explain to my child that everything in the world is not fair? How can I help my child grow up to be an ethical individual? How can I help my child internalize the values that I feel are important?

I like to view moral development as happening in four stages. The first stage I like to call "Staying Out Of Trouble" and occurs roughly between the ages of 3 and 6. The second stage I call "But It's Not Fair" and occurs during school age, 7 to 12. The third stage I call "Finding the Right Crowd" and corresponds to adolescence. The fourth stage is really the maturation of the young adult into the modern world, hopefully with the ability to act morally and make ethical judgments. I call it "Being Grown Up in the World".

The child in the "Staying Out of Trouble" phase of moral development generally knows what the rules are within the family or preschool setting. However, the child does not yet understand why the rules are important or necessary. Since the rules are not internalized and are imposed externally by parents and other in authority, the child's primary motivation to obey the rules is to stay out of trouble. Because a child in this stage of development is still very egocentric, rules are something to manipulate and get around.

As parents, there are many things that you can do to help your child in the "Staying Out of Trouble" phase. It is important to explain the reasons for rules and the consequences for breaking the rules. Why is it important to treat people kindly? Why is it important not to steal? Why is it important to tell the truth?

Another tip for parents with children at this stage is to use the power of positive reinforcement. Rewarding a child for exhibiting appropriate behavior increases the chances that the appropriate behavior will be repeated. Also it is much easier (and less painful to the parent and child) to use positive reinforcement than to punish a child for an inappropriate behavior. However, both positive reinforcement and negative consequences will be used in the course of parenting any child.

In the second stage of moral development, "But It's Not Fair", the child believes that everything ought to be fair. While most of the time the child uses this to exact revenge for some kind of hurt, this type of thinking can be used in reverse, inducing a child to be kind in the expectation that they will be paid back. The child in this stage understands that rules and consequences are important to keep the world running smoothly. However, they

have a very difficult time understanding that the world is just not fair and that random negative things happen to us even when we do nothing to deserve them.

There are ways that we as parents can help our children come to grips with the fact that the world is, indeed, not always fair. It is important to teach your child that “fair” does not mean “equal” and that sometimes what is most important is giving someone what they need and not what they want. Active listening is an important skill for parents to use in this task. It will be much easier for a parent to teach this important concept if a child has felt that his feelings are understood and accepted.

In the third stage of moral development, “Finding the Right Crowd”, a child’s sense of personal value is dependent upon the judgment of others. They rely on the reflection of their behavior in the words or actions of others for an idea of what is right or wrong about their own behavior. The approval of peers and parents is very important to adolescents.

In this stage of development, adolescents are working hard to separate and individuate. This is necessary to create their own identity separate from that of their parents if they are to become independent and responsible adults. However, it can also be very painful as parents may watch their children reject their values in favor of what is currently popular with the adolescent crowd. If parents have laid a good foundation in the earlier stages of moral development, I encourage them to have faith that this foundation will withstand this phase of development. However, it is important to demonstrate integrity to your children – to mean what you say – since they are very sensitive to hypocrisy at this age.

Finally, continue to demonstrate unconditional love and to be consistent in discipline and behavior management. Obviously being a moral model for your child is important in any of the stages of moral development, as well as consistency and unconditional love. Finally it is important to respect our children and demand respect in return.

In summary, in each of the four stages of moral development, there are many things that parents can do to help their children learn how to make moral and ethical choices in their lives. Maintaining consistency in discipline, demonstrating unconditional love, being a moral model, actively listening to their children’s feelings, demonstrating integrity in their own behavior, being honest in answer important “why” questions, are just a few of the techniques used by successful parents.