

RESEARCH ON MORAL JUDGMENT

Developmental Implications for Parents and Teachers

by Ted Ward

What lies behind the recent flurries of excitement about teaching moral values?

Do people need to be convinced that moral values are important? Hardly; at few other times in recent history has a nation been so pre-occupied with moral and ethical issues.

Do educators need to wake up to their responsibilities in teaching moral values? Maybe, but it is hard to find an educator who lacks concern for his students' values. The problem may lie in knowing what to do that will make any difference — after all, school has been “a-keeping” for a long, long time and nobody has yet found any sure-fire way to pass values intact from one generation to the next!

Do parents need to become more involved in the moral development of their children? Indeed, yes, but what practical suggestions can be made? Do this, or do that, and all will be well. Oh? Life is so complex and the influence of parents so seriously eroded that few will put much hope in home and family as forces for moral renewal.

So why are so many turned on? On the face of it this would be a great moment for weeping and wailing! Instead, there are all sorts of evidences of willingness, even eagerness, to *do* something about value development education.

The enthusiasts can be divided into three groups: the cult of character, the cult of clarification and the cult of Kohlberg. (It may not be

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fair to call all of the enthusiasts “cultists,” but very few people seem to show much caution in what they are adopting, or even much willingness to learn from any other cult but their own!)

Educators and parents who are into *character* have, in effect, redoubled their efforts in one of the oldest forms of values education. Teaching is telling and showing, and if the child knows the good, surely he or she will be more apt to do the good. Christians are especially prone to hang their hats on these propositions, because to believe the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God is to believe that one has the key to the moral order of the universe. But though Christians have it, there is some doubt about their effectiveness in sharing it. Perhaps there is more to it than developing character through “show and tell!”

The second group focuses on the *values clarification* movement. Because the cult of character seems so prone to overlook people’s need to understand themselves and see how values affect their individual lives, a whole series of exercises and activities, largely emphasizing self-deception and self-disclosure or open sharing has become widely used. Though there is great value here, there are two basic problems: values clarification doesn’t deal with the question of sources of values — it tends to be very relativistic; and the matter of self-disclosure is still an issue — how healthy is it to bare oneself to the norm-oriented influence of peers?

Although not everyone in the third group, the cult of Kohlberg, draws the same implications from the research of Lawrence Kohlberg, this Harvard University professor has had an electric effect on educators who are interested in moral development. As a social psychologist, Kohlberg has provided a much-needed framework for moral education. As a philosophical humanist, he looks at his findings in a non-theistic way. Regardless of this limitation, he has made a responsible inquiry into the nature of human development through the study of a particular group of people, making repeated interviews over many years. His interviews deal with the person’s moral judgment, particularly the developing mental structure underlying the moral decision-making capability. There are wise and unwise uses being made of Kohlberg’s research. Thus, though the research is highly significant, those who take Kohlberg’s theory as a sole source have made of it a cult.

Highlights from Kohlberg’s Research

The following are some of the more important evidences that have come from Kohlberg’s inquiries:

1. Three kinds of structure account for moral judgment in human beings.
2. The moral judgment of a human being develops through a series of three distinct levels (kinds of structure), or is stalemated at some level.
3. The three levels can be described as operational concepts of morality upon which one makes judgments:
Level One – right and wrong is determined by self-interest, shaped in response to rewards and punishments from outside.
Level Two – right and wrong is recognized as originating and being determined by authority, communicated through responsible persons (models) and through collective expressions of morality (rules and laws).
Level Three – right and wrong is determined inside oneself, on the basis of principles that have been freely chosen and willingly embraced by the person.
4. The three kinds of structure emerge in a predictable and invariable sequence. (No regression has been found.)
5. Distinct developmental hurdles (potential stalemates of development) exist between levels one and two and between levels two and three.
6. A person hears moral messages in terms of his or her level of moral development. A message intended to represent a structural position far above the hearer's structure of judgment will be distorted by the hearer to bring it into a structural meaning supportive of his or her present state of development.
7. Certain key concepts run through the levels of development, substantively being refined in specific meaning in accord with each level: *justice* is the most notable; others are *prudence* (including obedience and orientation to social authority), and *welfare* (responsibility).
8. At the highest level of structure (level three), justice emerges as the controlling or dominant structural value. Thus, development to level three involves a natural process through which value *contents* are altered (changed, abandoned, or deepened) in accord with the principle of justice.
9. The quality of justice in a person's environment is closely related to the facilitation of development. When the quality of justice is high, development is enhanced and facilitated – stalemating is less likely.

Implications for Parents and Teachers

Kohlberg's findings suggest an intriguing answer to the perennial question, "how should you discipline children?" The matter of moral influence of the parent or teacher is a complicated matter demanding something more than a flat yes-or-no, do-or-don't sort of answer.

Children need encouragement, exhortation, correction and reproof. In the years while moral judgment is, at best, only partially formed within a child, he or she needs reminders and "coaching," lest the childish behavior become seriously anti-social and destructive. What is the way for parents and teachers to exert moral influence? Rewards and punishments have their place!

Later in childhood, and indeed throughout life, the problems of misbehavior are more likely to come from discrepancies between moral judgment and moral action. How can parents and teachers have a positive effect on the moral actions of the maturing child? Rewards and punishments can outlast their usefulness; there comes a time when examples, models, and even fair rules become effective.

The image of discipline for many people is *control*. We would argue that one human being controls another only at the risk of being inhumane. Though we have responsibilities for each other, and surely parents have special responsibilities for their children, each person is a free moral agent; self-responsibility is the most realistic moral influence. Thus, to discipline effectively involves engaging in some act or process, short of controlling another person, that has a positive effect in relation to the person's self-responsibility. At best, to discipline is to have positive moral influence. Kohlberg's research suggests that such influences would vary according to the stage or level of moral judgment of the person.

As moral judgment begins to develop in the child it is highly ego-based. What is right is what feels right; what is wrong is what works to the child's hurt or disadvantage. Here is the period when rewards and punishments have their greatest potentialities to communicate moral influence.

When the child gains enough mental capability to grasp other people's viewpoints (perspectivism, Piaget calls it) the focus of moral judgment moves outside the self and *others* become important as the source of moral authority. At this time the child begins to lose some of the former responsiveness to rewards and punishments and takes on an increased alertness to models and examples. Further on in this second great level

of moral judgment, the orderliness that comes through rules and laws becomes important and the developing person, usually adolescent or adult by now, takes on a high degree of responsiveness to clearly defined and just rules and regulations.

Those who develop on into the principled justice level (Kohlberg's level three) of moral judgment lose some of their responsiveness to laws and rules as moral influence of rules and laws. Transactions and dialogues with other people become even more important as a mode of moral influence.

In Figure 1, following, a hypothetical picture of this concept of "peak responsiveness" is presented. The three levels or major kinds of moral judgment identified in Kohlberg's findings are represented as zones, from left to right. The three levels are seen as periods when each of the three major modes of moral influence are predicted to have peak effects, respectively. The first mode, rewards and punishments, related best to people who are making moral judgments in terms of level one; the second mode, models and rules (differentiated by the dotted lines to represent the separate peaks of these two sub-divisions of the second mode), are most effective for people who are making moral judgments on the basis of level two; and the third mode, dialogue and transaction, is the most effective moral influence on people.

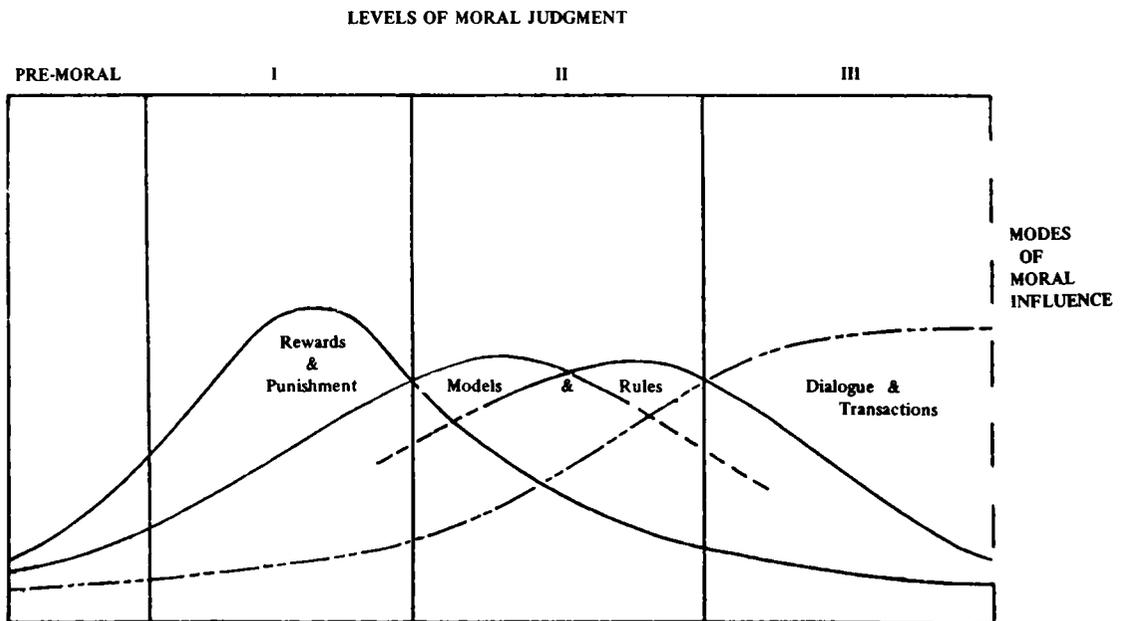


Figure 1.

Graphic representation of the hypothesis of "peak responsiveness"

Developmental Implications

Very practical implications can be seen. For example, who would be expected to respond best to a Sunday school attendance contest with its typical pay-offs? Who is apt to be least influenced by a discussion of the moral implications of honesty? Who is most likely to be disinterested in a memory verse chart with gold and silver stars? Who is most apt to be influenced by reading an exciting biography or thrilling testimony? Who is most likely to be watching the example you set? Who is most in need of clearly defined and just rules? Perhaps each of us should reflect on our own life history and trace through this series of peaks in our own experiences.

The sequence can even see it in terms of religious development: who is most inclined to respond to threats of God's wrath? Who is most concerned about "doing what Jesus would do"? Who is most satisfied that "if God has said so, that settles it"? Who is most enthusiastic about the daily fellowship with God, willingly, eagerly entered into?

The chart does not suggest that one loses all of his or her capability to respond to any of the modes of moral influence. Even people who are clearly judging right and wrong in terms of principled justice are capable of flinching if a punishment is profoundly threatening. Piaget says that we bring all of our previous capabilities along with us through our lifetime of development. He calls it "vertical integration," the bringing of earlier modes of reasoning along as a "checked baggage" through the travels of life. The problem for parents and educators is to recognize that what has a great deal of moral influence at one state of life will likely have less influence later.

It is for this reason that we doubt the wisdom of keying the high point of an instructional program to "modeling." Surely, modeling (focusing a learner's attention on the lifestyle features that exemplify righteousness) appeals to a higher level than does the rewards and punishments mode, but by no means is it adequate, even for those adolescents who have moved into the upper state of level two. Children are not condemned to a moral life no more developed than their parents; all of us are capable of developing beyond the models we have encountered in parents and teachers. Anyone can continue to develop a higher structure of moral judgment if the opportunities for dialogue and transactions in the social environment are available. They don't even have to be dialogues and transactions with people at level three! (We are not here describing the ideal conditions for development into level three, but rather the potentialities even in the face of poor conditions.) If this were not so, every succeeding generation of society would, by statistical

probability, be unlikely to develop up to the structural level of the prior generation. Human society long ago would have descended to animalistic chaos.

The graph (Figure 1) also represents an important concern for developing the basis for dialogue and transaction early in life. It is never too early to engage a child in reasoning about right and wrong. It may not have much effect in level one and not much more in level two, but you can't wait until level three arrives to start it! The relationship between the parent or teacher and the child has to have within it the fundamental respect and acceptance that will provide a basis for mature dialogue and transaction. One of the most common laments of our time is the cry of parents for help in building a relationship with a child in need. What is so hard to build in bad times should have been established in good times – but it wasn't needed then, the child seemed so obedient and so responsive.

Implications for Educational Planning

The most important conclusion one can reach from Kohlberg's research is that the learning environment should be a just and moral community. First, it should be a *community* – the “people” dimension is more important than the place or the time. Moral values are formed inside oneself through experiences transacted with other people. The community needs to be *moral* – a group of people regarding each other in respect and from a basis of shared concern for righteousness. In order for this to be realized there must be a continuing and pervasive concern for the quality of justice in the learning environment.

In order to bring all of this into being educational planners will need to see that the educational program (curriculum) includes certain sorts of experiences. These experiences must be constantly evaluated to determine that they are resulting in the intended outcomes for which they are designed. Following is a list of the four educational experiences seen as most needed for moral development of learners in an educational program or institution:

1. *Experiences*: Reflection and analysis of contemporary, circumstantial and environmental situations.
Intended Outcomes: Increased awareness of moral and ethical aspects of contemporary life.
2. *Experiences*: Participation in the improvement of the quality of justice in the environment.

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Intended Outcomes: Discrimination and sensitivity to issues of justice; competence in orderly pursuit of justice; sense of participation and involvement in the community.

3. *Experiences:* Examination of sources and substance of moral and spiritual teachings.

Intended Outcomes: Increased familiarity with available bases for judgment; skill in identifying principles underlying legal and moral codes.

4. *Experiences:* Reflection on one's own personal development, clarification of the *structure* of moral judgment and confrontation of the moral action and moral judgment discrepancies.

Intended Outcomes: Awareness of contents and structure of one's own moral judgment; acceptance and understanding of disequilibrium states; expanded sense of relationship between content and structure.

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