

Children learn morality from their parents

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Conscientious parents want their children to develop attitudes of kindness, fairness, honesty and responsibility. They hope their children will become caring and trustworthy and have respect for others. For convenience, let's call these desirable ways of acting, good moral behaviour. So parents wonder how it happens that some children develop into their adult lives with good patterns of moral behaviour while others do not.

Some thoughtful moral thinkers such as the renowned Greek philosopher, Aristotle, emphasized the importance of children learning by forming good habits at an early age. Aristotle was a student of Plato and a teacher of Alexander the Great. Approximately 350 years before the birth of Jesus, Aristotle reasoned that moral habits of honesty, punctuality and sharing could become engrained in a child's conscience. Aristotle believed this development of conscience could be accelerated by observing the good habits of parents or teachers and by following laws or rules that embodied good examples of moral behaviour. In other words, morality can be "caught" by the models set by others. Conversely, Aristotle advocated avoiding poor examples set by associating too closely with children or adults who were bad models.

In more modern times, some philosophers and psychologists such as John Dewey and the late Harvard University professor, Lawrence Kohlberg, presented the concept of moral development as a rational concept. Children needed to reason their way to moral growth. Teachers and parents were encouraged to have their children think about the consequences of their actions. Questioning, rather than memorizing rules and moral laws was Kohlberg's teaching method. His teaching style was Socratic rather than Aristotelian: "How do you think it makes your friend, Billy, feel when you exclude him from your circle of friends?" "What would our world be like if no one shared or helped each other?" "If a lot of people told lies, would it make the world better or a worse place in which to live?" Kohlberg's aim was to make children think harder about the consequences of moral and immoral behaviour. As children grew older, they were encouraged to think big thoughts about general principles for society rather than being told what rules they were to follow.

My own view is that young children do not handle abstract reasoning very well. They identify with their parents and take their concepts of right and wrong thinking and behaviour from that which parents model and teach them to believe. For young children, Aristotle was right in stressing good habits by setting clear guidelines and modeling the kinds of behaviour that reinforce the morals parents teach.

As children age, they will observe the behaviour of their fellow classmates more closely than they observe their parents. Between 10 and 20 years of age they will look to their friends for their clues about how to dress, how to talk and how to impress the friends with whom they associate. The teaching of their parents will have less effect on their behaviour. It is hoped they will carry with them many of the rules and habits they learned earlier. Much of the behaviour of friends of their own age may seem confusing and less consistent with the earlier input from their parents. This can be an anxious time for their parents who no longer set their children's moral compasses nor impress them with their examples of hard work, honesty, caring, and other good moral habits.

On the positive side, it can also be an opportunity for caring teachers to help adolescents re-tune their moral directions. Teachers and parents can encourage students to consider why some actions and decisions are better than others. It can be a time for helpful teachers to sit in on discussions about moral values that are broad and encompassing.

Perhaps, most important of all, it can be an opportune time for teachers and parents themselves to be good models of moral behaviour. While young students have their eyes on their classmates, they continue to look to their parents and teachers as the stable models of morality in their lives.

When it comes to moral development, in the end, it is both caught and taught.