



## Editors' Comment

Each generation believes they are facing new challenges in raising responsible children. As we start the 21st century, the world is a different place than it was even ten years ago and is sure to continue to change. With change come both challenges and opportunities. No challenge is more important than raising our children to become adults with sound values and a sense of responsibility to themselves, their families, and their community. In this issue of the **NYU Child Study Center Letter**, we review the developmental processes—the moral and cognitive reasoning along with conscience and empathy—which enable children to distinguish right from wrong. Knowledge of what's typical at different ages helps adults understand the meaning of children's decisions in situations which present moral dilemmas. We also discuss how parenting styles and attitudes affect their children's values. According to research, parents who are warm and communicative with their children, starting at an early age, while still maintaining control in the form of limits, raise children who are more self-respecting, more socially competent, and deal more effectively with problems. As children grow, the parents who are open to discussions of tough issues such as aggression, violence, sexual activity, and substance abuse let their children know that they care about them and exert a powerful influence in their lives. The final section of this CSC Letter presents some strategies to help parents prepare their children to follow a steady path in changing times.

HSK/AG

## Learning Right from Wrong

### Introduction

*Aretha, age 4, pocketed a candy bar that appealed to her when she was in a store with her mother.*

*Sidney, age 10, preparing for a math test, wrote some formulas on his hand to refer to.*

*Alex, age 15, was late in handing in a science paper, so he found some information on the internet and submitted it as his own.*

How do children come to know the rules of their family and their community and learn what's fair, just and right? The process starts at an early age, and several strands of development are intertwined—children need to comprehend what's expected of them, to want approval and to care about others. It's a matter of both mind and emotions. Children gradually develop the cognitive and emotional capacities that form the basis of knowing and feeling what's right and what's wrong and then acting in accordance with that knowledge. And they need caring adults to help them. Taking a candy bar, cheating on a test, and using someone else's ideas have different meanings at different ages. The 4-year-old who takes a candy bar doesn't yet understand the idea of private property; the 10-year-old who cheats on a test knows he shouldn't do it, but thinks it's okay because others do it; the 15-year-old, however, when faced

with ambiguous moral choices, is intellectually aware of the ethical issues involved in submitting someone else's work as his own.

### The Toddler and Preschool Years

Young children think about good/bad and right/wrong in terms of personal consequences, not in moral terms. When 4-year-old Aretha took a candy bar in the supermarket, she found out it was wrong because her mother told her to put the candy bar back and not to do it again. She's not likely to repeat the behavior because she wants to please her mother and she doesn't want to be punished.

Preschoolers consider rules sacred and inflexible, which makes it difficult for them to distinguish between intent and behavior. In terms of punishment, preschool-age children judge actions by the damage done; the more the damage the more serious the crime. For example, they consider breaking four dishes while helping to clean up a more serious crime than breaking one dish deliberately. They don't yet understand that intention matters; that breaking something on purpose is different than breaking something by accident. So they may not understand the logic of punishment. By the age of seven, however, most children are able to consider intention as a factor in judging the seriousness of an incident.

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Empathy, or feeling for the emotions of others is key to developing a sense of right and wrong; it emerges at an early age and needs to be nurtured in a caring environment. Even babies cry when they hear other babies cry, and toddlers respond to distress in other children—verbally as well as nonverbally—by offering a hug or other physical sign of concern. Young children come to recognize that there are standards of acceptable behavior and feel guilty if they violate them. Although they are mostly concerned with their own interests, young children also understand ideas about fairness, that all children should get equal amounts of cookies and should take turns, for example.

## The Middle Childhood Years

By 7 or 8 children are guided by a law-and-order orientation; they still understand right/wrong in terms of obedience. They behave because they don't want their parents or other authorities to be angry and punish them. As they mature their conscience or inner voice helps them follow the rules even when there's no adult around to punish or chastise. They are able to foresee the consequences of their behavior. (For example, an 8-year-old realizes that if he stamps on a video game in frustration and anger, there are a series of consequences: the game won't work any more; his parents will be upset; he'll feel bad because he's disappointing his parents; and he'll feel upset by his own bad behavior.) In addition, as children learn to see the world from someone else's point of view they are able to refine their black and white thinking about what's right/wrong; good/bad; polite/rude. In the middle years, children seek social approval and they adhere to expectations because they want to be liked by their peers. They have a strong sense of justice; acts

of kindness, generosity, sharing and cooperation are seen as good and lying, cheating, aggression as bad. They come to realize that rules can be flexible; what's fair is more important. Although issues of conscience affect the thinking of children of this age, sometimes concern about being liked by peers is more important than conscience in guiding behavior.

During the years of middle childhood, children move from an orientation to external authority and threats of punishment as criteria for right and wrong to a view that doing the right thing is based on standards of behavior and concern for the welfare of others.

## The Adolescent Years

Intellectually, adolescents have the ability to view societal rules and moral situations from different points of view and to integrate different perspectives. They are capable of criticizing established rules that they view as unjust. Concerned about the welfare of others, many adolescents follow their conscience and may act to bring about fairness and justice, ready to accept punishment for their actions. Adolescents spend a good deal of their time independent of their parents, interacting with their peers and need to make decisions about smoking, alcohol, drugs and risk-taking behaviors which test the stability of their sense of values.

**In summary,** major changes in children's ideas about right and wrong occur as they reorganize their thinking as they mature. The early belief that doing the right thing means adhering to authority gradually changes to the belief that one should act according to ethical notions of fairness.

Yet some children who know that lying, cheating and hurting others are wrong still lie, cheat and hurt others. A combination of factors

enters the picture: age, parental influence, social factors, peer influence, stress effects, atypical development of a sense of conscience and, as is currently being researched, wiring in the brain.

## Parental influence— what they do matters

Children learn about the world and develop a conscience and sense of values from their parents and others who are close to them. Children tune in to real messages and values and soon realize if what their parents do doesn't match what they say. Parents, dealing simultaneously with family, work and other responsibilities, also have to deal with a number of challenges. Spending time with children is a major challenge; estimates indicate that children in the United States spend 10 to 15 fewer hours of time with their parents than they did 40 years ago. Another challenge for parents is the influence of the media. The increased presence of the media in our lives provides ready access to vast amounts of information and entertainment, bringing with it both good and bad influences. Many programs are entertaining and informative but a growing number reflect disrespectful, antisocial, aggressive behavior, at variance with the values of many parents. What's a parent to do?

### Parenting styles—how they affect children's development

The ways in which parents relate to their children falls into certain patterns, and finding the right balance is the key to helping children attain an internal sense of conscience and values. Research has identified basic parenting styles:

1) When parents balance affection, warmth and respect with

a firm level of control in the form of limit-setting, children are more likely to be self-respectful, to deal with problems, and to establish a sense of values. (e.g. "We listen to your ideas and opinions as we develop family rules.") This parenting style is known as *authoritative*.

2) When parents are overly indulgent children often have to struggle to learn the limits of what's acceptable and to develop their inner controls. (e.g. "We will let you find yourselves.") This parenting style is known as *permissive*.

3) When parents are too controlling and autocratic (e.g. "Do as I say because I say so.") children have difficulty in establishing their own control, sense of social responsibility and their own sense of moral values. This parenting style is known as *authoritarian*.

Following are some parenting suggestions that may prove helpful in finding the authoritative or middle ground:

### Teach by example

Be aware of your own needs and the ways in which your role as a parent is colored by your relationship with your own parents.

Monitor your own behavior in the ordinary situations of daily life; children tune in when adults tell white lies, such as saying you're not at home to avoid certain people, writing an excusal note for school saying the child was sick, when he's really going to visit a relative.

Model helpful and kind behaviors, such as assisting people in need, lending a hand, or giving up your seat to an older and/or handicapped person.

Praise your child for unselfish acts.

Point out the consequences of one's acts for others.

Participate in positive activities such as community service, sports, music, all of which imbue children with a sense of purpose.

### Teach by ongoing dialogue and discussion

Make communication a priority. Take time to explain your decisions and motives and listen to your child's point of view.

Children have to make their way through a thicket of contradictory messages, so be clear and allow for more than one discussion as situations arise.

Make your expectations clear. Make children aware that their opinions are respected, but remain firm in your decisions. When you set limits enforce them.

Allow children to participate in decisions which affect the family.

When discussing a child's behavior, focus attention to the way in which the feelings of the other person are affected.

Use television scripts to discuss possible alternative endings to situations.

Role play: play pretend games in which children play several roles, helping them experience other points of view.

Discuss books your children are reading, focusing on the choices faced by the characters.

Begin to talk about attitudes towards sex, drugs and alcohol when children are young.

## When good kids do the wrong thing

The very young, who don't really understand what rules are, should not be punished for taking something, although they must be told not to. (See Aretha, above)

Don't overreact to broken rules or minor infractions at the ages of 5 or 6. It's likely that the child misbehaved on the spur of the moment. At this age children may see their own behavior as correct (e.g. lying) if it gets them what they want. Try and ascertain the reason for the lie. Tell them their behavior is wrong and point out the consequences.

Around 4th or 5th grade, when academic demands increase, some kids feel the pressure to get good grades and will take short cuts. (See Sidney, above) Peer pressure also becomes important and kids may do something wrong if they think everyone else is doing it. Have an open discussion about cheating, be clear about why it's wrong, and that it won't be tolerated. Help children understand that they may experience conflict between immediate satisfaction, peer approval and doing the right thing. Make sure your child is not under undue pressure.

Teach children how to say no. Talk about situations in which a child or adolescent might be tempted to drink or use drugs (a party, a sports event, etc.) and whether he might be taunted if he refuses. Role play ways of reacting in such situations.

Be involved in your child's life even in adolescence. Involvement doesn't mean insisting that things be done your way. Involvement means knowing your children's friends, attending school meetings, being familiar with their music preferences—all of which show you're interested and you value who they are. Encourage your teenager to volunteer in an after-school or other community program—these actions enable them to appreciate what they have, understand their unique value as a person, and gives them a sense of their ability to contribute to the good of the world.

## Staying on track

According to William Damon, Director of the Center for Adolescence at Stanford University, healthy adolescents have a strong, passionate interest in something and a person who inspires them. Confident and compassionate parents have a good chance of raising a confident and compassionate teenager who thinks about moral and ethical issues and gets involved in the community.

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## About the Author

Anita Gurian, Ph. D., Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the NYU Child Study Center, is the Senior Content Editor of [AboutOurKids.org](http://www.AboutOurKids.org), Editor of the NYU Child Study Center Letter, and the author of several books and numerous articles about parenting and child development.

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