

## **Assessment 1 (7<sup>th</sup> December 2001)**

### **WHO HOLDS THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MORAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN ?**

Moral philosophy is hard thought about right action.  
**Socrates**

The purpose of this essay is to create a body of knowledge for follow-on research in the field of the impact of different factors on moral development of children. For this purpose information was gathered through the study and analysis of materials presented in books, research journals, and professional publications so as to determine: "Who holds the responsibility for moral development of children?"

On initial consideration, the question posed here seemed to bracket nicely few main points of the subject, but that impression appeared to be wide of the mark, especially when it came to making judgments concerning the notions of "morals" and "morality". Really, what is a morality? What does it mean to be a moral person? Our values, both moral and non-moral, were acquired along with our basic language and socialized behaviours when we were young children and come from some very strong traditions that are part of our societies and our cultures. Law, religion, our family and peer group all tell us what we ought to do, but following these more traditional "oughts" does not necessarily constitute a moral life. A great number of people, however, do live long and useful lives without ever consciously defining or systematically considering the values or moral rules that guide their social, personal, and work lives. During most of our lives we simply decided what was right and did it.

Webster's Dictionary, Tenth Edition, defines "morality" as "conformity to the ideals of right human conduct; virtue." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "morality" as "the doctrine of right and wrong in human conduct; conformity to conventional rules by religion or other spiritual influences." However, the terms "right or wrong" and "right human conduct" are totally subjective: they have different meanings to different people. Who decides what is right or wrong? Is our moral decision just as simple as the proverbial coin toss? Who sets the standards and norms? Probably, there is no easy answer to any of these questions, neither is there a single universal definition of the notions. One of the most wide-ranging descriptions of "morality," where words "right" and "wrong" are avoided, belongs to Russian psychologist Rubenstein, who believes that "morality is conformity and devotion to a set of standards initiated and/or accepted by an individual; an individual's active adherence to his accepted standards for the duration of his existence." (Rubenstein, 1982, p.129-130)

As in many areas of educational research, the field of moral education is full of controversy, which is directly connected with the debate about the definition of “morality”. These debates are not limited to psychological accounts of the nature of morals, but also include the questions of

children’s moral development, extending to their general development and to the very definition of educational aims in this area.

“Moral development should be related to all the fields that use the word "development." In ways that are not easily measurable, moral development has some connection to physical, social, political, religious, and other kinds of development. And, of course, economics being so central to development, one must ask about the correlation of moral development and economic development. To ask about this relation may seem to be a silly question, but perhaps it is just an embarrassing one”. (G.Moran)

Children develop morality slowly, and in stages. Each stage, beginning from the preschool years and continuing even in the adult years, has its own theory and idea of what is good and right and different reasons why people should be good. Each stage brings a person closer to mature moral development. These issues have been approached by many psychologists, but the most prominent input into this research was done by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. The purpose of Piaget’s studies was to investigate the growth of moral judgement in children. However, he did not merely seek to examine their moral behaviour, but tried “to establish the degree to which children at any given age and stage can reason “morally”, so that we may know the framework within which we must operate when we seek to help them to develop the moral standards acceptable in our society.” (Brearley, 1968, p.120). Piaget discovered that young children have a much more primitive understanding of right and wrong behaviour than older children: they judge bad behaviour by the amount of damage caused by a person's behaviour.

Kohlberg carried Piaget's work into adolescence and adulthood. According to Kohlberg (1984, p.67) there are three levels of moral development with two stages each. During the first level (Pre-conventional) children are concerned with avoiding punishment (Stage 1: Punishment-Obedience) and getting one's own needs met (Stage 2: Individualism). This level and its stages fit into the framework of young children up to the age of ten years.

During the second level (Conventional) children are more concerned with living up to the expectations of others (Stage 3: Interpersonal Conformity) and want to do the right thing because it is good for the group, family, or institution (Stage 4: Social System and Conscience). This level and its stages fit children over the age of ten years and on to adulthood.

The third level is called Post-conventional. During this level individuals govern their behaviour by the relative values and opinions of the groups they live and interact with. Right behaviour is based on a "social contract" (Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights) with others and in the validity of universal moral principles (Stage 6: Universal/Ethical Principles), which may or may not agree with societies laws. Laws that agree with universal moral principles are obeyed but when those laws violate these principles, the individual follows the principles instead.

There are many other theories and approaches to this issue, but our question is about another aspect of the matter: who is responsible for moral development of children? To answer this question, first of all we need to determine the circle of possible relationships that can influence child’s moral development. Of course, in the widest sense, all relationships may be regarded as part of social development, but the earlier, more personal relationships have a great impact on the process of moral development.

“Morality is not something that is practised in isolation. Morality is, among other things, an aspect of our relationship with other people. And anything which diminishes our ability to make

such relationships successful diminishes also our capacity for moral actions.” (Williams, 1970, p.109)

The moral development of the very young child brings out the interrelation of all ages. One cannot describe the moral development of infants without referring to the moral development of parents and grandparents. “Parenting a child is one of life's great moral adventures, and so is the "childing" of one's parents.” (Rubenstein, 1982, p.89) Moral life is shaped by our responses to a pattern of relations. The responses in the relation of adult and child are not equal, but the process can still have a degree of mutuality. We often underestimate the infant's power of receptivity to moral influence. Robert Coles (1997, p. 45) states that character or moral development is an interaction between “nature and nurture”, which takes place in a very early age. It develops as a result of parental interaction, balanced discipline styles, and a child's own choices. Children learn about right from wrong from their earliest experiences. When they need nurturing or feeding and parents fulfil that need without excessive indulgence, then children develop characters that accept rules and tolerate frustrations later in life. The infant needs to know that he is “merely a self among other selves, that he is not omnipotent, that other people have need and feelings too.” (Williams, 1970, p. 37)

There are two sides of discipline and the parents’ aim is to try balancing them. Too much love and a child becomes spoiled, expecting their every want and need to be met regardless of other people's wants and needs. According to Huxley (1985, p.17), this causes children to be stuck in the early stages of moral development based on selfish individualism. That's fine for a two-year-old, tolerable in a six-year-old, and obnoxious in a twelve-year-old or older. Too many limits and the child develop a low sense of worth and a lack of self-control. This usually results in an overly rebellious child or an unhealthy submissive one. (ibid.)

Achieving this balance is difficult. But it is easier to do if discipline is viewed not just as punishing wrong behaviour, but as a process of shaping character. Parents are not simply setting limits. They are teaching how to distinguish right from wrong. It is easier to say "no" when we know that we are guiding the child's moral development and eventually, his or her social success. As the later stages of moral development reveal, children can make a choice not to follow society's rules or laws. Parents must accept that reality. That's part of parents' on-going moral development. Understanding moral development allows parents to assess their children and have a better target for their individual development. Hopefully, the end result is that our child will be the one who will stop and wait for someone in need, regardless of what the crowd says he or she should do.

“The ideal is that the child will develop, as Kant put it “as a law-making member of a kingdom of ends”. He must not only come to know what is in general right or wrong; he must also go beyond this level, so that he sees why such rules are right or wrong and can revise rules and make new ones in the light of new knowledge and new circumstances.” (Peters, 1981, p.33)

The described importance of parents’ influence leads us to the conclusion that a child's moral education is the primary responsibility of the family. Other aspects and factors, other religious and social organizations and institutions can each make their contributions to the process, yet none of them can replace the family.

While the school cannot accept the primary responsibility for moral teaching, it still has a significant role to play in the reinforcement of a child's moral understanding and behaviour. The school is a community and should be characterized by courtesy and civility in all its activities,

with instruction in specific subject matter informed by moral understanding. Today leading educators no longer see their job primarily to be the teaching only the curriculum subjects. The philosophy of education has undergone a fundamental change. Teachers now perceive their jobs to be the involvement in reshaping of the child's values, beliefs and morals.

“Teaching is now being viewed as a form of therapy, the classroom as a clinic, and the teacher as a therapist whose job it is to apply psychological techniques in the shaping of the child's personality and values”. (G.Moran)

Whatever is good education is moral education. It occurs through interaction between the teacher and a child, interaction with other children, through play, instruction, friendship, political debate, and quiet reflection. Whatever reshapes these activities to enhance their meaning and lead us to the next step in life deserves the name moral education. The only basis for developing morals is what the child himself wants or thinks, and/or what the peer group decides is right. Strong convictions of right and wrong are looked upon as evidence of poor social adjustment and of need for the teachers' therapy. In this case the role of the teacher in the contact with the children becomes paramount.

“Given the small amount of individual attention that the average child is likely to receive, and given its almost certain uneven spread amongst different children, it may well be that the quality of the contact, when it does occur, is of very great importance.”(Boydell, 1978, p.71)

Participation in the moral development of a child lays huge additional responsibility on a teacher, who already shares the responsibility for the value content of the taught knowledge and for the way in which she/he teaches knowledge and, thus, cultivates a certain attitude to the world at large.

“Even though education is, in its original meaning, primarily a moral matter, one might think of schools as institutions where it is necessary to transmit exclusively technical and pragmatic knowledge. If morals do not exist or are of no relevance, moral education isn't either.” (Ozer, 1999, p.232)

Moral education always has been an expression of the political and social state of a nation. If harmony does not exist between education and society the teacher finds him/herself in a challenging situation in the attempt to rationalize the changes in moral issues. Balancing the educator's moral duty to enable students to deal with the contradictions inherent in any complex value system, with the educator's role as an agent of that very society defines the core moral question confronted by any teacher. In my own teaching experience I had to face a moral dilemma of whether and to what extent to engage my pupils in consideration of such controversial matters. The breakdown of the former Soviet Union and its dispersal into component parts revitalized an already existing feeling that the Russian nation needed to return to its roots. There was much talk of "the Russian school", and curricular discussion was turned on ways of reinforcing pupils' national identity. People were concerned about the commercialisation of all spheres of activity, the growth of criminality and the fact that the worth of education itself was even called into question. The pupils had questions about who was right and who was wrong, but I didn't have the answers: there was no way of knowing at that time the real impact perestroika and glasnost has had on the country; nor was there a way of knowing the impact these measures will have on the educational system.

By the middle of the new century our world will be run by those, who are children today. But the decisions that will affect them before they are old enough to assume leadership will be made by us. As we wonder what kind of leaders they will be based on the powerful forces of violence and hatred, with which they are faced, we must remember that we are in charge today. We, parents

and teachers, have the choice of either passing on to them a legacy of peaceful coexistence, or allowing the crisis of violence to increase its own destructive momentum.