

Parent Partnership Handbook

A Parent Guide for Middle-School Years

The Moral 'Tween

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Morality is a personal code of habits or principles of good and bad, right and wrong. A person's moral sense evolves through life. The moral development of 'tween-stagers, the focus of this newsletter, reflects the moral reasoning theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, who suggested that motivational thinking prompts codes of conduct.

Kohlberg (1927-1987) hypothesized that when people experience a lack of harmony in their usual thought pattern (*cognitive dissonance*) or moral discomfort (*disequilibrium*) in a situation, they reason how to resolve the issue based on what they consider to be right and what they consider to be a reason to be good, as they define good. Kohlberg created stories of struggle (*moral dilemmas*) and then observed how children reasoned their solutions. From the pattern of responses that he observed during his research, Kohlberg determined that there were three basic levels of moral reasoning: (1) a self-focused morality, (2) an other-focused morality, and (3) a principle-focused morality. Each level of moral development includes two stages.

Moral maturity does not happen because of a birthday. An adult person may function at a child's level. Though stages represent a rank-order direction or movement towards adulthood, they are more fluid than rigid, and the ages suggested are merely guidelines. A variety of conditions influence movement from one stage to the next. Additionally, even though a child exhibits one particular stage, he/she may move in and out of the stage in a given circumstance. 'Twins *ought* to have completed stages 0, 1, and 2 and begin stage 3 by age nine.

Stage 0 (pre-school years) is a **pre-reasoning level**. It is characterized by egocentric reasoning and motivated by self-satisfaction. **Stages 1 and 2** demonstrate **pre-conventional reasoning level**. They judge the morality of an action by its direct consequences and the benefit awarded to them. **Stages 3 and 4** reflect the **conventional reasoning level**. They judge the morality of actions by comparing them to society's views and expectations. "Stage threes" conform to please important others and to get approval. Ages 9-11 desire the approval of parents and teachers, whereas ages 11-13 want to be considered necessary, preferred by peers, and valuable to the team.

'Tween Morality: A Transition Time

Stage 3 'twins tend to conform to whatever is the popular, majority behavior. They view "right" as living up to the expectations of the significant others that they know and care about. "Good" is having peers think well of them so that they think well of themselves. Their internal law is, "I want to be accepted and preferred by my peers."

Maturing 'twins transition into the moral reasoning of stage four. They adopt a "duty first" attitude that is characteristic of seeking self-respect through keeping commitments and fulfilling obligations to society's rules. "Right" is fulfilling responsibility to the social system. "Good" is keeping the system from falling apart.

Proactive Parent Practices

Moral growth occurs when parents and teachers meet children "where they are" and advance their thinking one stage beyond. How? Through moral dialogue that introduces mental discomfort (*disequilibrium*) and, in turn, challenges the moral reasoning of the 'tween.

- Help children develop an independent conscience based on self-respect and social responsibility.
- Conscience shifts from rules to an inner standard. Communicate the perception that Gospel principles and the Commandments are tools for relationship rather than sterile laws.
- Discuss social and moral issues that focus on the relationship between the individual and society and our responsibility to cooperate for the common good.
- Teach 'twins to apply to issues the standard, "What if everybody did this?"
- Encourage growth in initiative and industry—essential functioning as a responsible member of society.
- Help 'twins to develop goals and to view work as a way of contributing to the welfare of others.
- Seek 'tween opinions, listen carefully, involve them in family discussion, planning, problem-solving, and dialogue. ▲



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