

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: I'm concerned about my child's sense of right and wrong. He seems only concerned with avoiding the consequences, not whether an action is good or bad. How can I help him understand that consequences aren't the only point?

ANSWER: Depending on a child's age, he may not have reached that point in his moral development. Just as there are physical and cognitive developmental stages, there are stages of moral development.

A person's moral development is slow and progressive:

1. From birth to about 4 years old, a child's sense of moral reasoning **centers on self**: "I am the center of the universe. What is right is what I want." The reason a child chooses to be good is to get rewards and avoid punishment.

2. Around kindergarten age, a child usually comes to understand that he should do is what he is **told by authorities** in order to avoid punishment and get rewards: "Doing what I am told to do is right. What adults say is right."

3. In early elementary school, the child becomes acutely aware of the effect of moral choices on self: "What's in it for me?" The child's perceived view of **fairness** is a major factor in his/her view of morality. "What is fair is right."

4. During middle school and early teens, the child begins to see value in the opinions of important people in his/her life: "I should live up to the expectations of adults I admire. I should **do good to people I like**, so that I can feel good about myself."

5. Often, during high school, the young adult expands his/her responsibility to **include society**: "I have obligations to society. It is right to fulfill those obligations. I should do my part."

6. Sometime around a person's late teens or college years, he/she learns the value of all people, **understanding that all people have**

rights and are intrinsically valuable: “I should be good to satisfy my conscience.”

7. As Christians, hopefully we go even beyond stage 6 to a point where we have “denied ourselves” and “taken up our cross” to follow in the way of Jesus: “I am not the point of the universe. God is. I can live for God and others, because I am well-loved by God.” We love, because he first loved us (1 JN. 4:19).

Christians are “good” (we try to keep God’s law) because we have been loved first. Out of gratitude to God, **we are free to do good works and be moral.** Because God sent his only Son to die for us, self-esteem is moot... it is a given... we have neither the need nor the desire to dwell on any aspect of self.

I wish everyone automatically progressed through all these stages, but alas, we all know 40-year-olds stuck in stage 1 or 3.

How can a parent help his child move through these stages?

1. Understand moral development so you can know the mind and heart of your child. A parent cannot “push” a child through these stages, but **s/he can create opportunities for his child to seize, thus “nudging” him along.** Kids need moral guidance! I don’t think it necessarily takes a village, but it certainly takes family (deep, relational involvement on the part of at least one adult) to raise a child morally.

2. Make appropriate allowances for age and understanding. (Asking a 2-year-old: “How would you feel if someone did that to you?” has little value.)

3. **Teaching by example** is a parent’s most effective tool. Also, use stories and movies that illustrate good moral choices. Play the “What should you do?” game with your kids... create moral scenarios and talk your kids through the correct moral response.

4. Help your child learn to **think critically and evaluate decisions** based on the morality found in Scripture. Foster the idea that morality is not an opinion or relative in nature and does not change for

pragmatic reasons. **For Christians, morality is revelation... God has revealed his morality to us in the Bible.**

5. Give your child responsibilities that have moral outcomes. (e.g. Picking up trash at a neighborhood park helps everyone, babysitting young siblings helps keep them safe, taking care of something borrowed is respectful and right... etc.). Hold yourself and your child accountable when you or he makes mistakes.

6. Teach your child God's Law (not only the "letter" of the Law, but the "spirit" of the Law as well). Help your child understand moral failures in acts commission (moral failures that we actually do) and acts of omission (actions we should do, but choose not to do).

7. Love your child through touch, words, time, and prayer.

8. See also *Jack's Corner* on Moral Absolutism.

Jack Lipski, M.A.
Christian Counselor

(Permission granted to copy for personal use only.)