

Promoting Moral Cognitive Development in Children and Adolescents



According to Kohlberg's theory of moral cognitive development, moral development is acquired through three developmental stages: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Children at the pre-conventional level focus more on the good and the bad and nothing in between. For example, they see no purpose in a bad situation with ultimately good intentions. Conventional level two is all about egocentrism because they are more self-focused and believe that the right thing should favor them.

Typically, children below the age of nine have stage two characteristics. For example, they think sharing is good for the recipients but are less willing to share when the role is reversed. They also believe that set rules for society are absolute; therefore, people must adhere to them. Finally, the post-conventional level is when children logically examine a situation to understand that society does not necessarily function under one set of rules; instead, they are influenced

by moral values formed and vary in different cultures. Children at this developmental stage understand that people hold different beliefs and values that do not necessarily align with authorities as long as their values align with their communities.

Developmental domains in children have been shown to progress uniquely in every child, and the regression stage in Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theory explains the irregularities in child development. Conversely, this theory has been criticized due to its fluctuation in the moral regression stage in college students who regress to the egocentric stage. Contradicting the theory further is Kohlberg's belief that moral development is still being formed at the conventional level when morality is expected to have developed at this stage. Hence, just like other developmental theories, Kohlberg's method had some limitations. Still, it has also significantly shed light on children's moral cognition, especially children transitioning from high school to college.

Kohlberg's moral cognitive theory encourages moral competence in children instead of imposing societal moral values on them. The study suggests that moral education is essential for children because it enhances their moral cognitive competence to judge life events. This probably explains our innate instincts to look within for answers in certain situations in life. Kohlberg encouraged moral education through class interactions involving real-life moral dilemmas to help develop children's moral competence. The ultimate goal of moral education is to provide enough guidance for children to cultivate self-efficacy in moral judgment.

Moral development in child

adolescent development



Cognitive development studies show that children can distinguish things that happen accidentally and intentionally as early as age one. In a little over a year, they learn to help others. Conversely, toddlers do not like to share at all, but they are okay with the “you have yours, and I have mine” situation. However, at about age three, they begin to consider the act of sharing with others. Children are great observers and learners and learn moral behaviors through interactions with other children, friends, and families. They can tell when someone is unkind, maybe by saying cruel things or perhaps through their actions, such as hitting them. They also closely observed their parent’s interactions with others, and many studies have shown that children form their moral judgment through their observation of others. If a child grows up in an environment full of people who typically are not kind to one another or do not consider other people’s feelings and well-being, they are likely to pick up on these moral values.

A study on preschool children ages 2-5 showed that at this age, children already have a clear understanding of parents’ emotions and family expectations through parent-child interactions. Children are taught moral cognition through

communication with parents, caregivers, and teachers. Studies have shown that children's moral cognition is significantly influenced by their everyday lives and the people they socialize with; therefore, their moral cognition is formed as they observe and interact with the people around them. The study also questioned this theory because it states that moral cognition is socially influenced, not hereditary. And if this is true, then it is hard to explain the similar moral cognition in children in different parts of the world.

At preschool age, children essentially understand when someone is good and when they are bad. This is often expressed when a child hits another, then they are being nasty and are usually asked to apologize. Or when they do something nice to the other, that often warrants praise from parents or caregivers like "you are such a good girl." Communication then plays a significant role in introducing children to moral values; for example, in another interaction involving two preschool-age children, their moral cognition for doing good or bad was hinged on their needs and the needs of others. And they had no thoughts on consequences or the societal norms and values.

Children do not fully grasp the concept of morality at preschool; alternatively, their moral cognition is centered on being good or bad. This is why Kohlberg's theory views preschool-age children as pre-moral because they only begin to gain the broader concept of morality in middle school.

Sometimes, making morally sound decisions can be complicated, depending on the situation. For example, if you were asked to make a decision that would cause harm to ten people and save one person, it would be a no-brainer to save the ten people. However, preserving the lives of ten people in this scenario does not justify harming one person. These are moral dilemmas that life often throws at people. It still involves harming a person, even though it prevents ten from potential harm. It would be morally questionable if a person chose to save one person and expose ten to danger. Moreover, studies revealed

that moral decisions are often spontaneous and do not involve a lot of thought because the part of the brain linked to rationality and emotions is activated in stressful moments.

Cultural, context, and Youth Moral Development



Bullying has been shown to have adverse effects on children's cognitive ability, social skills, and mental and emotional well-being. Due to its detrimental effects on child development, there have been increasing studies surrounding bullying and its impact on children and youths. Some cases are mild, and others worse. In some worse cases, victims of peer attacks have resulted in self-harm and suicidal attempts. A study aimed to understand why 85% of youths choose to be witnesses in bullying incidents found that kids may refrain from helping victims of bullying due to the fear of becoming the next victim themselves.

The study aimed to shed light on why youths would often look the other way instead of helping their peers from harm and revealed some of those reasons to be the fear of being bullied. For example, watching their peers bullied may be a

terrifying experience that they would not want to be a victim of such circumstances. Therefore, their moral judgment is impaired at that moment due to fear. In addition, the rules of the school or community may also influence bystanders. For instance, if the school is known to discipline students for being involved in an altercation without investigating the incident, they may get punished, discouraging youths from intervening.

In a study conducted in China, a researcher interviewed some 11th graders for their opinions on bystanders. One of them said that “silence is golden,” and most of the students agreed that watching someone being bullied was none of their business; therefore, they remained silent and did nothing. Indeed, trying to help someone in trouble may also get them in trouble; not helping at all goes against the golden rule of sound moral judgment. Moreover, doing nothing may imply acceptance and promote the problem’s recurrence.

Conversely, helping stop someone from being hurt by another may lessen the reoccurrence of the situation significantly. These 11th graders’ decision to be audiences of an attack without trying to help is a shared cultural value that aims to self-protect. One of the students said that when people are in a vulnerable situation, it makes sense to help them but shows concern about whether or not the victim will feel undermined—implying that aiding the victim might not be perceived as a good deed. Instead, the victim may get upset for being seen as weak. However, the similarities in their responses point to cultural influence in how people react in such circumstances. Studies have shown that when youths intervene in a bullying episode instead of becoming a bystanders, they help lessen bullying incidents.

We would love to hear your thoughts in the comments below.