



The Development of Morality in the First and Second Planes of Development

By Allyn Travis

The foundation of moral development takes place during the earliest years of a child's life, just as the foundation for all later developments are laid during these early years.

In *The Absorbent Mind* Maria Montessori wrote, "The child in the post-natal period of his embryonic life absorbs from the world about him the distinctive patterns to which the social life of his group conforms. And once the patterns have become established within him, they remain as fixed characters, just like his mother tongue.

Later on a man may develop himself indefinitely, but it will always be on this foundation.

The growth of moral formation comes from within the child, and every adult in the child's life either nurtures that moral development or hinders it by putting obstacles in the path of its development. In the first plane of development the young child is focused on himself and his own construction. He needs to be helped and guided toward independence and toward making good choices for himself.

Dr. Montessori observed startling changes in children, beginning around the age of six. These changes indicate that the child is passing on to the next stage, or what Montessori referred to as the second plane of development. The child's focus changes from one centered on individual formation to development as a social human being. This second plane child is ready to begin exploring the abstract.

We also find new powers appearing in the children to facilitate these changes. The absorbent mind of the first plane, that mind that soaks up facts and images and qualities of the world, changes to a mind that can reason.

The children now are found to ask "how," "when," "where," and "why." They are searching to understand the reasons behind the facts they learned in the first plane of development.

With this reasoning power a whole new world of abstract thought and discovery opens up for the child. Second plane children become reasoning explorers of the abstract and the realm of conceptual ideas intrigues them. They want to use their developing powers of reason to come to their own conclusions about right and wrong.

Is what's good and bad the same for everyone? What exactly do we mean by "morality"? The etymology of the word morality is from the Latin word *moralis* meaning "custom." It is important to remember that what is considered moral differs from group to group and culture to culture. Learning the morals of society is part of the child's adaptation to the society. All human beings have to adapt to their group, to their culture, in order to feel secure in that society. We have a need to be accepted by the others in our society just as we must accept them if we are going to live harmoniously together.

In *Education for Human Development: Understanding Montessori* Mario Montessori, Jr. writes about a detailed study done by the French psychiatrist Dr. Andre Berge. Dr. Berge explains how human beings can only find their way in a world that they can conceive of as structured, physically as well as psychically. Dr. Berge sees in this basic need of human beings for order the universal root of the moral phenomenon, a phenomenon that initially appears as an organizing principle.

It is eventually incarnated in the moral apparatus of human beings and permits us to exist with a minimum of damage to others and to ourselves. It can, moreover, be the source of a special kind of pleasure: that of doing what we believe to be right. Hence, morality is not simply an internalized penal code. The great motor of our moral apparatus is love. This love is shifted, more or less, from the senses to the spirit; but it is nonetheless this same force that enables an individual to reach beyond himself and towards something from which he will get no personal benefit.

Many experts agree that moral values begin to develop quite young and that they continue to change and evolve throughout one's life. Childhood is the time, however, when moral values are learned, ethical principles are tested and religious beliefs are established. It is also the time when the various parts of



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the brain - emotional and intellectual - become better connected, allowing children to think through their various reactions, setting moral values and then acting on them. Researchers seem to agree that moral dilemmas are of great interest to school aged children. According to Robert Coles in *How to Raise a Moral Child: The Moral Intelligence of Children*:

It is a real passion for them...In elementary school, maybe as never before or afterward, given favorable family and neighborhood circumstances, the child becomes an intensely moral creature, quite interested in figuring out the reasons for the world, how and why things work, but also how and why he or she should behave in various situations. This is the time for growth of the moral imaginations, fueled constantly by the willingness, the eagerness of children to put themselves in the shoes of others. Most experts seem to agree that positive social behavior - acts of sharing, helping and caring - is learned in much the same way that antisocial behavior is learned: from parents, teachers and peers.

Very few children always follow their parents' moral standards, their culture's conventions or their own best moral thinking; and yet moral thought has a decided influence on children's actions. As they get older, children increasingly try to figure out their own standard of what is the right thing to do, and they feel guilty and ashamed when they do something wrong even if no one else knows about it.

In general, elementary aged children consider loyalty to siblings or peers, especially to a close friend, a compelling reason to ignore community standards or proper action or behavior. Many children in research studies have said they would cheat, lie or steal to help a needy friend.

Furthermore, authority figures - parents, teachers, police officers, and storeowners - are not always seen as right. It is always reassuring to find current research validating what Dr. Montessori first put forward so many years ago and to find confirmation that what we are doing in our classrooms and in our home environments is still the best that we can be doing.

Dr. Montessori believed that lectures on morality are of little use to children and can even have a negative effect. Regarding social behavior, she said that children need to reason through to their own moral values. She wrote:

A second side of education at this age concerns the children's exploration of the moral field and discrimination between good and evil. They no longer are receptive, absorbing impressions with ease but want to understand for themselves, and are not content with accepting mere facts. As moral activity develops, they want to use their own judgment, which often will be quite different from that of their teachers. There is nothing more difficult than to teach (by direct methods) moral values to children of this age; they give an immediate retort to everything that we say. An inner change has taken place but nature is quite logical in arousing now in the children not only a hunger for knowledge and understanding but also a claim to mental independence, a desire to distinguish good from evil by their own powers and to resent limitations by arbitrary authority. In the field of morality, the child now stands in need of his own inner light.

It is through the realization of the human gifts, intellect, and will, that children develop moral integrity. Their reasoning powers allow them to form their own judgments of good and evil; their will enables them to exercise the self-control to live by those judgments.

The plan that Dr. Montessori developed for elementary classes naturally guides the children to an acceptance of others different from themselves without trying to change these others to fit their own image. To accomplish this, the teachers are not to mold the children after themselves but rather are to guide the children to freedom and independence. She said that, "If during the first period of development the teachers have used very gentle methods and have intervened as little as possible in the activity it is to the moral level that their gentle methods ought now to be oriented."

Our approach to the moral and spiritual development of the children needs to be the same as it is in any of the other areas: the teacher needs to appeal to the intellectual powers and the psychological characteristics



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of the child's plane of development. At the second plane this means that we appeal to the child's reasoning mind and interest in exploration of society and those who have contributed to it, and the values of compassion and gratitude.

It is important to introduce the children to the heroes of their culture and to the heroes of the world, both past and present. They need positive examples of others who have contributed to society.

Social life within the classroom provides another natural opportunity for the children to discover moral values. Constantly working in a group and abiding by the classroom rules encourages exploration of moral attitudes. The freedom in the classroom makes it possible for the children to discuss their relationships and behavior openly with each other on a daily basis.

As Montessori teachers we know that "work" will normalize the child and so we are often focused on getting the children back to work with the materials or lessons. We, therefore, intervene much too soon, thinking that getting back to material or research or whatever will take care of the problem. Working out emotional or social issues needs to be just as much a respected part of the classroom and the activities that go on there.

Sometimes we have to teach a child how to express feelings, how to tell another child how something made him feel. Sometimes we have to give them the words that they need. Children need to be taught how to handle their own feelings before they can handle the feelings and emotions of others.

Many times in elementary classes we use a class meeting to discuss issues that affect the whole group. If used judiciously these class discussions can give us a great opportunity to discuss issues reasonably and to help all of the children see the repercussions or benefits possible, depending upon how the situation is worked out.

Young people growing up in today's world are going to face more and more challenging moral issues as our scientific and technological expertise continues to expand. Human cloning, stem cell research, the on-going destruction of the natural habitats of the animal and plant kingdoms are just a few of the hot button topics currently being talked about. These issues raise complex moral dilemmas. We are going to need reasonable, thoughtful people with a high level of integrity to make the decisions necessary here. We owe it to the children; we owe it to the world, to help future generations develop the ability to make these choices.

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