



# Monitoring a Child's Moral Motivation

by Sandy Friesen

**H**ow do children develop a moral mindset? By *moral* I mean a sense of right and wrong with a desire to do what is right.

Like most developmental processes, moral maturity involves utilizing a different set of tools and strategies for each child. There are no lists of things you can do to instantly obtain "moral kids." However, there are principles you can use that will help you. To understand those principles, start with the basics: "What have we learned about moral development?"

Specialists who take moral judgment apart and examine the intricacies of making solid, healthy, Christ-like decisions say that there are levels or stages of how we make our choices. The levels include:

## Level 1:

"I'll do the right thing because I don't want to get punished."

## Level 2:

"I'll do the right thing because I want a reward."

## Level 3:

"I'll do the right thing because I don't want to be rejected by good people. I want their approval. I want to be perceived as a good person."

## Level 4:

"I'll do the right thing because it's the law. If the authorities say it's right, then it's right."

## Level 5:

"I'll do the right thing because

we as a society have agreed upon an acceptable form of behavior. Since I have entered into a social contract with my community, I will do the right thing."

## Level 6:

"I'll do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. Not because I will be punished or rewarded, not because I want to be thought of as good or because it's a law, and not because I've agreed with the community. I do what is right because it is right."

Interestingly, research has also discovered that in our culture, girls tend to make moral choices based on wanting to be perceived as good, or from a nurturing perspective. On the other hand, boys tend to make their moral choices based on justice, laws, rules, or what is acceptable to the authorities.

Some teachers and parents say that there's nothing wrong with any of these motivations. They argue that "I don't care why the child makes the right choices, as long as they make them."

This philosophy concerns me. How important is motivation? If a student doesn't steal because he or she doesn't want to get punished, is that child as trustworthy (or mature) as the child who doesn't steal because it's not healthy for our culture?

Another question in the study of moral maturity is: "Can a child jump to a higher level of thinking/feeling/believing without going

through the earlier phases of development?" The answer to this question has predominantly been *no*; that's why many discipline cycles proceed through similar levels:

## Level 1:

"If you hit someone, you'll get a time out."

*Do it right or get punished.*

## Level 2:

"If you don't hit, you'll get a sticker."

*Do it right and get a reward.*

## Level 3:

"I like it better when you don't hit."

*Do it right and people will like you.*

## Level 4:

"The rule is no hitting and we follow rules, don't we?"

*Do it right because it is the law.*

## Level 5:

"No one else in the class hits, so you shouldn't either."

*Do it right because we have all agreed it is the right thing to do.*

## Level 6:

"Hitting hurts others, so choose another way to express your anger."

*Do it right because it is the right thing to do.*

We want to take our children to higher levels of moral development. Punishment or reward is not enough to keep kids on the straight and narrow. The law or

people's approval will not always keep a person in check. *We want children to do what is right because they have a sense that we are all on the planet to fulfill God's plan.* We must recognize a child's *motivation* in order to help the child discern his reasoning and to continue the processing of maturing.

It is not enough to do the right thing out of fear or because it's the law. We must come to the place where we do the right thing, because it is the right thing to do. Review the levels listed above and determine **your Moral Teaching Type Tendencies.**

Monitor your teaching strategies:

▼Do you tend to focus your training on higher or lower levels of moral development?

▼Do you vary your approaches?

▼Do you base your reasoning on the child's individual needs?

▼Are you stuck in a rut of threatening or rewarding?

Another important concept to understand is that a child cannot

skip from the lower levels to the higher levels without practice, exposure, experiences, modeling, and instruction. For example, if a teacher says to a biting three-year-old, "Don't bite because it hurts the other child," and the child responds with, "OK, sorry," we would all be shocked.

The dilemma then becomes "What level of moral development do we appeal to?" Many factors come into play, including the child's learning style, the issue or event, the consequences, etc. That's why moral development is a process and not just an event. It is many decisions over a long period of time. While a child may share a toy one day because it is the right thing to do, they are just as likely to hit the same playmate, with the same toy, on the same day, and be "forced" to do the "right thing" by fear of punishment.

"Great!" you think. "I have to monitor, mentor, and maintain an attitude of teaching and problem solving with this child all the time!" Right, and here's the "good

news." This process of development takes years. So what can a teacher do? Begin by practicing the following principles:

▼**Memorize** the levels so you can be sure that you are not getting stuck on reinforcing one motivation.

▼**Monitor** the child's motivation. Help him think about why he wants to do the right (or wrong) thing. Help him consider higher levels of reasoning.

▼**Mentor** by example. If you constantly state "You don't want to get in trouble, do you?" or "You want a reward, don't you?" you may be inadvertently keeping the child on a lower level of moral development.

▼**Maintain** a teaching/problem-solving attitude in your class. Life's lessons are learned in the everyday incidentals. Make every moment an opportunity to mature in Christ.

These principles should help you make the teaching of moral development a purposeful goal in your classroom.

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## Questions For Further Study—

1. What levels of moral development can you identify in the children in your congregation? Are they age appropriate?
  
2. What can you do to increase the level of moral development in the children in your congregation?