

## Why is Understanding the Morality of Children Important?

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### Abstract

The rising moral issues and the morally insensitive decisions taken by children have been serious matters for society. This article examines the prevailing moral issues among children and the need to understand their moral development. The recommendations of National Education Policy 2020 are also reviewed in light of the moral development of the children. Several tools and methods are suggested in order to know and explore the evolving moral thoughts of children and understand the process of development of morality among them.

**Keywords:** *Moral Development, Moral Issues and Moral Reasoning*

### Introduction

Morality has always been a matter of concern for parents, teachers, communities, societies, and policymakers. The children are taught; they vicariously learn and experience from their environment and develop their morality. In the early stages of their life, be it infancy or later stages, children also start developing a moral sense through their feelings and desires. Therefore, there are lots of forces in society that try to influence the moral development of children. Some of these are family, parenting, schooling, teaching, media, friendship, peer circle, etc. Moral Development is often associated with the building of good character, associating with understanding right and wrong, developing a perception of the world, determining behaviour, and making decisions at the time of moral issues. There have been many serious issues and matters reflecting the present scenarios of the development of morality or moral sense among children. These can be easily reflected by the news highlighted in the newspapers and on the news channels.

### Understanding Moral Issues

These days, there have been lots of cases reported in the past when children have made hazardous moral decisions in order to fulfil their self-interest. Looking at instances like the Pradyuman Thakur Murder case where a senior schoolmate killed him to delay the examinations, a 16-year-old boy killed his mother in order to play PUBG and hide her body for two days,

another 12-year boy allegedly made a bomb threat call to the Railway Police Helpline in order to stop his PUBG playing friend from boarding. Numerous such cases portray the direction of the moral sense of the children. Such cases reflect the lack of understanding of the importance of an individual's life, the value of relations, and excessive focus on self-interest. This is not just news but a warning bell for the society that questions the efficacy of various societal systems and institutions in developing a sense of right and wrong among the new generation. It is not only these news stories that mirror this issue but several other incidents of killing, cheating, merciless beating, bullying, etc., are regularly reported in every corner of the world, which portray a missing sense of right or wrong in the children's actions. Such incidents raise indispensable questions like how children arrive at such harsh solutions to their moral problems and how one could understand the developing sense of right and wrong among children. There is a need to address such questions and understand the process of moral development among children.

Generally, children spend much of their time at school and at home. The stakeholders of school and home, i.e. teachers, parents, and other family members, spend maximum time with them. Despite the full involvement of children with the school teachers, parents, and other family members, such incidents reflect unattended and insensitive moral standards of the children.

Today, most of the children's time is spent on mobile phones, the internet, gaming, and surfing. They have limitless access to the virtual world. Anything appropriate or inappropriate is just a click away from the children. Multimedia has a great role in shaping children's thoughts, and the internet has given them free access to it. Whether it is merciless games like PUBG, brutal videos, or some sexual content, these are very easily accessible to young children. However, after the pandemic, children have unlimited access to the gadgets like Mobile Phones, Tablets, Laptops, and computers, and because parents are working or ignorant, their usage of the internet is hardly monitored by them. Therefore, exposure to lots of multimedia content and receiving less time from the parents makes the situation more miserable. The children are exposed to content that affects their moral sense and develops insensitive morals and distorted morality among them. Hence, as caretakers and guides of a children's life, there is a need to understand the moral development of the children and attend to their moral issues. Understanding the process of moral development requires a different type of involvement with the children which would propel their inner thoughts to be expressed and reflected upon. This will be discussed later in the article.

It is not today, but such efforts to understand moral development were done earlier as well. Various theologians, psychologists, and philosophers throughout history have studied moral development and the nature of morality. Western philosophy provides three platforms to think about human morality; those platforms are given by Christianity, French Philosopher Rousseau, and English Philosopher Locke (Dorough, 2011). Christianity provides the doctrine of original sin, which holds that without salvific intervention, all people will naturally behave improperly, selfishly, and without regard for the good of others. The second philosophical platform was proposed by Swiss-born French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). He believed that human beings are born good. Rousseau proposed that moral development requires little, if any, societal or parental intervention. People naturally develop a

sense of right and wrong. English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) proposed a third platform of moral philosophy that human beings are born amoral and are influenced by their experiences. Locke proposed the term *tabula rasa* (blank slate) to convey that morality is entirely derived from environmental interaction (Dorough, 2011). According to this thought, children are assumed to begin as nothing, and their character is shaped by experiences entirely. Now, if it is believed that children are blank slate or naturally selfish and bad, then as a parent or teacher, it is assumed that it is part of their job to teach children to be humble, generous, and cooperative, to instil the right ideas and avoid aggressive behaviour because these things do not come naturally (Mukunda, 2015). In this case, the whole responsibility for developing children's morality lies with the external sources, they are the sole authority for developing children morally. According to Rousseau's philosophical platform, the nature of morality is not to destroy the child's natural humbleness, gentleness, generosity, and honesty. According to his child-centred philosophy, adults should act receptively. Children are naturally good, and exposure to society's evils may corrupt them (Berk, 2011; Dorough, 2011; Mukunda, 2015). This in itself is not a holistic explanation of the nature of a child's morality. As parents and teachers, our way of handling situations and children is greatly influenced by which side of the line we fall on. But whatever platform we choose, we will not be very effective until we understand the true complexities of moral development.

Talking about morals, merely for one day, in a few classes, or a few interactions, may not effectively add to the development of a sense of right and wrong among children; rather, continuous efforts are required from parents, teachers, family, and society. This process whereby children or people form a progressive sense of what is right and wrong, proper and improper, is known as Moral Development (Dorough, 2011). As a parent, teacher, or another responsible member of society, it is important to understand the process of moral development among children. This understanding would guide

us to take the necessary steps for the harmonious moral development of the children.

### NEP 2020 Recommendations

The policymakers are also concerned about the moral and ethical development of the children. Looking at the Indian context specifically, the 'New Education Policy' has a deep concern for teaching children the importance of 'doing what's right' at a young age and providing a logical framework for making moral or ethical decisions. They also focus on the development of ethical reasoning among children, and as a consequence of it, they are expecting the development of Indian Traditional values, Constitutional values, and all other basic human values (*New Education Policy 2020 NEP 2020 Why so Controversial?* 2020). The functions of moral development or the development of moral sense are also associated with cultural, constitutional, educational, and basic human values. Therefore, it is important to understand what a child is actually learning morally and understand the developing moral sense.

### Tools and Methods to understand the construction of morality

There are many ways to understand the morality of children. A few are discussed below, which involves the active participation of the children and facilitator.

**Discussion** - A discussion is a multipurpose tool. It is an important method of learning which helps children to think, process, and understand information rather than simply receiving it. The children get the opportunity to express their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences with others. There has been a study that indicated that small-group discussions significantly increase moral reasoning skills, and these skills are teachable and measurable also (Self et al., 1998). The small group discussions could be used to understand the moral reasoning of the children and also help to build and structure it.

**P4C- Philosophy for Children (P4C)** is an approach to teaching and learning which encourages and develops children's caring,

creative, collaborative, and critical thinking skills. The classroom becomes a community of ethical inquiry where children question their own beliefs and prejudices. This type of community is committed to taking the inquiry beyond the boundaries of limits and promoting a Socratic dialogue in which students are the active knower of their own learning. The criticism faced during the dialogue of P4C would let children mutually contribute, contrast the arguments, and find good reasons to make moral decisions (García-Moriyón et al., 2020). Such practices would help children to reflect on their moral or ethical thoughts and reasons, and the facilitator to have an observation over those.

**Dialogue** - Dialogue is an indispensable tool for understanding the moral thoughts and moral reasons of children. Dialogue demands the active involvement of the participants. It gives immense space to explore and understand one's own thoughts and others' too. In other words, it provides a constructive and reflective space for moral thoughts, intra-personally and interpersonally also. The Children exchange their experiences and perspectives with each other, and this will help them to gain a better and fuller understanding of moral complex situations. Actually, Dialogue is not only an instrument or technique to arrive at a better decision, but it is understood as a continuous and ongoing learning process in which participants develop new, and richer understandings of their practice. Simultaneously, it also involves a responsive evaluation which also assists children in understanding their beliefs and practices from multiple perspectives. In dialogical interactions, there are chances that multiple perspectives may evolve into new perspectives if children are willing to acknowledge the limits of their own perspectives and want to change in their interactions. (Abma et al., 2009). This would provide enough opportunities for children to evolve their moral thoughts with dialogical interactions and continuously evaluate them.

**Responses to Moral Dilemmas** – This method is profoundly used by a well-known Psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), in his study of Moral Reasoning. To study the development of

moral reasoning among participants, Kohlberg has designed hypothetical vignettes of moral dilemmas. Based on the responses to these moral dilemmas, he gave a popular theory of moral development. This method can be used to talk about moral beliefs, moral reasons, and the moral sense of the children through hypothetical moral dilemmas. The children are given space to talk their hearts out about the dilemma and how they would choose to make moral decisions. Several questions are asked based on the moral dilemmas whose answers from the children reflect their moral understanding. Such Moral Dilemmas can be used with an individual child and with a small group of children as well. A cross-sectional study on the development of moral reasoning among school children has reflected that while discussing the answers to the questions on moral dilemmas, making moral decisions and giving moral reasons for those children have learned from their group mates. This learning has made them change their moral decisions and give more clear moral reasons to

support their decisions. This research also reflects that such small group discussions on moral dilemmas also motivate them to find some middle ground for the moral dilemma and make a more acceptable and well thought moral decision. (Shikha, 2022). This method also gives enough space for children to share their moral thoughts and check on them through peer validation.

All these tools and methods are the platform that may help teachers and parents to provide opportunities to open up children's thoughts about right and wrong, their moral beliefs, moral reasons, and their developing moral sense. Merely lecturing children about moral principles, telling them moral stories, and asking for moral stories are not enough to understand children's morality and develop them morally. The methods and tools which involve children actively in the process of moral discussions are far better than traditional classroom methods.

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