

### **Moral children:**

One of the most interesting aspects of parenting is to watch the moral development of your children. One of parents greatest concerns is helping children to learn to be good people, to do the right thing according to the standards and values of their family. Moral development is a natural part of a child's maturation. The desire to live a life consistent with virtue is not just a religious need, but a deeply human one. Every parent wants their children to grow up as honest, kind, and courageous people. This wish emerges from our innate morality. Many psychologists have examined the moral development of children, in particular a guy called Lawrence Kohlberg.

He assessed children's moral reasoning by presenting them with a series of hypothetical dilemmas in story form, each of which highlighted a specific moral issue, such as the value of human life. One of his most famous is the dilemma of Heinz. This is the story which you might present to some of your children or teens, just to tease out morality with them.

*In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid E200 for the radium and charged E2000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get E1000. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it to him cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said "No, I discovered the drug and I am going to make a living from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's pharmacy to steal the drug for his wife.*

The question is should Heinz have stolen the drug? What if Heinz did not love his wife? Would that change anything? What if the person dying was a stranger? Should Heinz steal the drug anyway?

On the basis of answers to these kinds of dilemmas three main levels of moral reasoning emerged. Note with your own children which level of moral reasoning they employ.

At Level one your child's judgements of what is right or wrong is based on what is punishable immediately punishable. Obedience is valued for its own sake or else for the immediate consequence that ensues. A five year old child, for example, might say about Heinz's dilemma that "He should steal the food because if his wife dies he will be alone for ever" or another little boy might say "he should not steal the drug because he will go to prison".

At Level 2 your child will decide that moral or right is what lives up to the families or significant group's expectations. Being good is important for its own sake and this is achieved by fitting in with a larger group. This is called conventional morality. Here a four year old child might say about their life "I try to do everything that my Mommy asks. I try to please her. Like she wants me to be a doctor and that's what I am going to be".

At Level 3 your child is beginning to develop a kind of principled morality where the child herself develops a kind of personal authority. It's less to do with parents or society and more to do with self-chosen values or principles. Children and teenagers begin to integrate their values in a carefully thought system of values.

What is inspiring to watch in most children is their natural sense of justice, morality, and virtue. These are taught by parents and society but they are also innate. Feelings of guilt, for example, are known to all children and adults - that unpleasant sensation of having done something wrong. Even a two year old child experiences this natural emotion. The truth about human nature is that we strive to be good, to find meaning, and to imbue value on certain kinds of life and living. Despite what you read in the papers, most of humankind down the ages has sought to collaborate with and show respect for others. There are universal ethical principles and virtues that transcend cultures and societies such as courage, kindness, honesty, perseverance, and love. This is why people like Mother Theresa or Ghandi were such an inspiration to young and old alike.

Watch you own children and explore their moral development with them. It creates great dinner table debates.