

Developing a Sense of Right and Wrong

Ann Hagell examines the evidence about how children develop a sense of morality, and the implications for criminal justice.

Morality is about thinking, feeling and acting. People can obey the rules without understanding why, but to be truly functional people we need to develop a sense of morality and a shared understanding of what is and is not acceptable in our treatment of others. Indeed, lack of remorse (and thus underdeveloped morality) is a core part of the definition of sociopathy.

A number of psychologists over the years have developed theories of how children learn to share society's understanding of what is right and wrong. The most famous of these are Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. In both their cases, they developed stage theories, where children have to go through one stage of development before they can move up to the next, more sophisticated level of thinking. In Kohlberg's theory, children are 'preconventional' (up to around age 10 years: decisions based on avoiding punishment and satisfying own desires); then 'conventional' (from 10 upwards, sometimes throughout adulthood: moving on from egocentric morality to

five or six year old trying to comfort them when they see the parent distressed or accidentally hurt. However, real understanding of the relationship between cause and effect is only beginning to be refined, and mistakes can work both ways, both to absolve the child from guilt when they should feel it, but also to assume all-powerful guilt when in fact the consequence was unrelated (as when primary school children may assume responsibility for parents splitting up). It is interesting to note that research has shown that children of mothers with more 'power-assertive' discipline displayed less guilt themselves in various situations (Kochanska *et al*, 2002).

In later childhood and early adolescence, with the development of growing mental abilities, children develop more sophisticated and abstract moral ideas. They also start to evaluate whether or not others have earned or deserve respect. They begin to question the social and political beliefs of adults around them, and their own values and opinions become less absolute and more relative.

A lot of the time young offenders will have developed a distorted version of what is 'right' rather than simply doing something they know is 'wrong'.

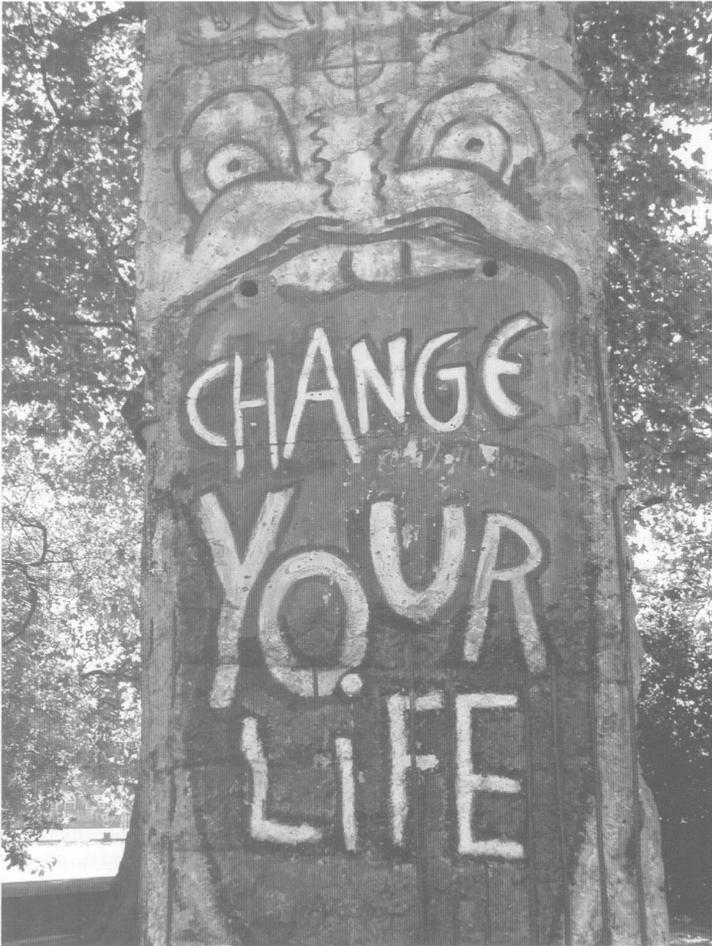
understanding the perspectives and needs of others and incorporating a desire to please); and finally 'post-conventional' (teenage upwards, if this stage is reached at all: understanding of universal moral principles which may or may not conflict with other rules such as the law). Essentially in most theories of moral development, morality develops together with the ability to think in more and more abstract terms. According to the theories, some of this can be taught, but sometimes constraints are placed by individual differences in ability to think abstractly.

Whether these rather inflexible 'stage theories' are right or not (and there is still ongoing debate), simply watching children reveals elements of these stages in progress. Learning right from wrong starts with the toddler's overpowering sense of ownership – it's mine. A shriek of horror goes up when someone takes the 18 month old's toy truck – this is clearly wrong! Then, as pre-schoolers, children begin to exhibit a basic sense of fairness, sharing and equality. They learn the distinction between morality and 'rules' or conventions. Now they understand the toy truck can be shared, and that everyone should get a turn, and their cognitive development allows them to understand that they will get it back so not all is lost. However, things are viewed as absolutes, there is no bending of the rules, and they judge the wrongness of actions by their consequences, rather than according to intentions. Around the time of starting primary school, consequences are often conceptualised in terms of the extent of the physical damage, and the likelihood of punishment, although it is easy to be surprised by how empathic even children of this age can be. Most parents have experienced their

How does all this happen? Very small children learn what is and isn't right by watching their caregiver's behaviour. Compassion can be encouraged and nourished from a very early stage. Children need to know the difference between rules (social conventions) and morals, and different responses to infractions of each help to teach them this. Moral issues will need more discussion and understanding, reasoning rather than punishment. Children then develop and refine their thoughts through experience in the social world they inhabit. Facing and resolving moral conflicts then becomes an essential form of practice, and often happens through free play in early stages and general socialising in later years. While cognitive abilities are important, both nature and nurture play a key role in ongoing interaction.

Morality is of course centrally related to justice and fairness, and to responsibility. Developing empathy with victims is a key part of trying to intervene to prevent re-offending, and a very fashionable element of today's youth justice. However, moral judgements do not always relate to behaviour in a simple way. Adolescents may understand why people should follow rules but will answer the question differently if asked why they themselves should. In practice, some young offenders respond very differently in the presence of conflicting peer pressure, the temptation of an instant 'buzz', and the adolescent need to establish a clearly separate and independent identity from the adults around. Research has consistently suggested that internalisation of moral standards depends to a considerable extent to the nature of parent-child relationships, before the peers become so important.

It is important to emphasise that values and subsequent behaviour are not always rational, or the rationale may not be



Portion of the Berlin Wall, Imperial War Museum, London.

immediately obvious to others from the outside. A lot of the time young offenders will have developed a distorted version of what is 'right' rather than simply doing something they know is 'wrong'. Much offending is an adaptive behaviour. It serves a purpose for the young offenders – from the outside it looks as if they are simply doing the 'wrong thing', but from their perspective they will be doing something that works for them and in that sense is almost right by different criteria. Understanding this helps to provide suitable intervention that may help them to change their behaviour and find other ways of getting what they need from their lives.

Is it possible to encourage moral development later in life?

The distinctions between right and wrong and the relationship of your own personal behaviour to your understanding of these continues throughout life. Even the early theories accepted that much moral development happens after the end of adolescence.

Also, as Michael Rutter and Dale Hay have pointed out, part of the challenge is not in encouraging the right action, but in learning to control and inhibit wrong or unhelpful actions and reactions (Rutter and Hay, 1994). Others have termed these the 'Do' and the 'Don't' contexts (Kochanska *et al.*, 2001). Clearly we go on learning how to distinguish these into old age!

Implications for youth justice

While it is important to recognise limits of the power of youth justice interventions, it is also clear that morality is not cast in stone at an early age. Much of what this all boils down to is respect. It is very clear, watching a young toddler, that children develop a sense of how they should be treated at a very early stage. They then learn about the existence of other people and different perspectives, and generalise from their own sense to an understanding of how other people should be treated too. These two key elements of learning how to respect others and learning to empathise are central to knowing what is right and wrong. If children are treated badly, the majority will treat others badly. This will continue to be the case through adolescence. While there is debate about the extent to which a strongly internalised sense of self-worth (or unworth) can be fully reversed, there is no doubt that treating young offenders as worthless will simply make a bad situation worse.

This will not punish them, it will further erode their moral development. These principles are essential, for example, in planning effective custodial sentences, as overcrowded prisons where young offenders have no purposeful activities and are not treated as if they matter are a hotbed for incubation of more offending on release.

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