

The Moral Child

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What is the most extreme example of moral behavior? My example would be the righteous Christians who risked their lives to protect Jews from the Nazi murderers. When scholars studied this altruistic behavior they discovered something very ordinary. These altruists explained that their moral behavior was learned at home, where they took seriously what they were taught by their parents.

Obviously, there were Christians who learned their morality at home, but did not respond by risking their lives. So what elements of moral development can we identify as leading to moral behavior. Michael Schulman, in his book *Bringing Up the Moral Child* offers three basic ideas: "1) internalizing parental standards of right and wrong action; 2) developing empathic reactions to other people's feelings; and 3) constructing personal standards of kindness and justice."

Unfortunately, Schulman does not focus on core values other than "...a child who strives to be kind, fair, and responsible." If parents are not clear about the seriousness of core values in their own lives, children may learn the words of morality rather than seeing the example of a moral life. So, parents must continually examine their own moral behavior and help children identify the moral behavior of others.

Empathic learning is also not a simple affair. At The Principled Academy we focus on empathic learning as part of our social and emotional curriculum from preschool through middle school. Empathy is not just a matter of feeling but also of understanding. In middle school, for example, I teach the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. It is a powerful drama that reveals how African Americans experience racism and how it impacts their lives. As I show the film as well as study the text, I hope students can be moved intellectually and emotionally by the power of the play. This is especially important for as I write this our nation is being convulsed with demonstrations against racism. Great literature teaches us to understand and care about others who are different.

Schulman's third point is also well taken. Young people need to learn to develop principles of moral behavior by internalizing those principles. To become a moral person, a person of character we need to guide our lives by what we have developed as our moral core. Students will often behave based upon what an authority, a teacher or political leader demands. Such behavior is based upon altruistic motivation. For someone to be motivated by moral principles, to become a person of principle, there must be intrinsic motivation. That is a person who feels and acts upon core values, irrespective of what someone demands.

What is most hopeful is that parents and teachers can help children develop self control and manage their emotions. We are not bound by selfish emotions, and everyone, even the youngest children, can be taught to care for others and develop responsible love. Self-centeredness can become other-centeredness where there is a balance between I and we.

Parents and teachers can help children make good choices in behavior based on core values. We are social beings and must be taught how to be responsible for caring behavior, how to love: to seek the benefits welfare and well-being of others and of oneself.

Children need to realize that there are consequences for irresponsibility. Occasionally at The Principled Academy a parent will allow permissive behavior on the part of a child. The child is cute or smart and does poorly in class. The parent believes the teacher is at fault and says nothing to the child. Permissiveness leads to self centeredness.

Parents are always the first and perhaps last teachers, and they need to model the moral behavior that they demand from their children. There are endless "teachable moments" during the day when parents and teachers can spot good or bad behavior. They can identify love as the foundation for moral development, not fear of punishment.

Needless to say, our culture often promotes selfish behavior. Greed, lust, and license have not yet disappeared as ideals for immoral behavior. Empathy, compassion, and a caring, loving family and school, however, are powerful antidotes to immorality and provide the best means of raising a moral child.



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