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Title	Developing the moral intelligence of children
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Source	<i>REACT</i> , 2000(2), 41-46
Published by	National Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# DEVELOPING THE MORAL INTELLIGENCE OF CHILDREN

Review by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Each child is potentially the light of the world, and at the same time its darkness—depending on the moral choices he or she makes on his or her own volition. Children are indeed the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. Young children are as fresh green branches which will grow in whatever way the adults choose to educate them. It is therefore prudent for all to ensure that appropriate knowledge, values and skills are made integral parts of children's education in order to build just and sustainable communities.

As children bear the seeds of the character of future society, it is incumbent that they are nurtured holistically—intellectually, socially, morally and physically. When left to drift in a world full of moral dangers and decline, there is no guarantee that these future citizens of the nation will have moral self-discipline, the courage to deal with hardship, the fortitude not to indulge in their whims when left to their own devices, and the perseverance to feel that they belong to the nation and share in its purpose. It takes conscious educational effort in morality to develop in the young the desired values, that



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is, all good qualities and traits, or virtues, or moral/spiritual attributes. Good characters are shaped by what adults do, or fail to do, with respect to the education of children.

Application of moral education in a knowledge-based economy means that children surfing Internet websites must learn to be discerning about what is morally right (Lee in Osman, 2000). They must learn about the common good and what is socially acceptable as well as how to contribute to the community. Personal salvation in the world today is insufficient. All, especially the young, must be taught to accept the realities of the interconnectedness of the world and how each one affects another person's life, and that it is collective salvation, or selflessness, which will see humanity through the new millennium. After all, we now live in a global and nuclear age and having more moral beings around is surely safer for the planet.

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Holistic education for child development has been advocated by a number of researchers including (Tang, 2000; Teo, 2000; Nirmala, 1999; Tan, 1998). This concept simply refers to nurturing children as whole persons with regard to their intellect (mind), emotions (heart), physical health (body) and morality or spiritual qualities (soul) (Teo, 2000). The "moral, cognitive, physical, social, and aesthetic" attributes of the pupil have also been listed as the *Desired Outcomes of Education* by the Ministry of Education in Singapore.

The literature on holistic education is saturated with studies on the cognitive and

emotive development of children. However, the literature on holistic education including moral development of children is relatively sparse. The aim of this paper is to review those few reports which focus on the moral development of children and then to summarise the implications for significant adults to foster moral development in children.

Morality for most educators is a specific system of conduct whereby children come to learn the good and the right, and reflect upon moral issues before engaging in a particular course of action. From this perspective, education of children in their moral intelligence in its formal sense, is the deliberate and intentional activity of cultivating both moral growth and moral judgment (Stoll and Beller, 1998). The researchers in the field believe that the development of moral intelligence of children is affected by three factors: environment, modelling and specific educational process (Piaget, 1932; Kohlberg, 1981; Kegan, 1982; Lickona, 1991; Fowler, 1992; Arnold, 1994).

Ralph Waldo Emerson once declared that "character is higher than the intellect". Logic would appear to substantiate this claim. Take a child who is clean, agreeable, of good character and well-behaved, but ignorant, is preferable to a child who is rude, unwashed, ill-natured, and yet deeply versed in the sciences, arts or technology. The reason being that the child who conducts himself well, even though he is ignorant, is of benefit to others, while an ill-natured, ill-behaved child is corrupted and harmful to others, even though he may be learned. If, however, the child is trained to be both learned and good, the result is light upon light. Training in morals and good conduct is thus far more important than book

learning. The Greek philosopher Aristotle defines good character as the life of right conduct—right conduct in relation to other persons and in relation to oneself (cited in Lickona, 1991, p. 50).

Robert Coles (1997) in his book, *The Moral Intelligence of Children: How to Raise a Moral Child*, discusses how a child could be raised to be a good person whose moral character and strong values will steer and sustain him or her throughout life. He suggests that adults should take advantage of “moral moments”, or what Popov et. al. (1995) call “teachable moments”, namely events and experiences when children’s consciousness of morality are heightened, to model positive behaviours for children. Coles (1997, p. 5) maintains that the child is an ever-attentive witness of grown-up morality—or the lack thereof. The child looks for clues on to how he ought to behave, and finds them galore as parents and teachers go about their lives, making choices, addressing people, showing in action their rock-bottom assumptions, desires, and values, and thereby telling those young observers much more than they realise.

Coles (1997) also discusses what he calls the “moral archaeology” of childhood. He puts forth the notion that a child’s sense of moral consciousness is shaped at the very start of life by the moral convictions and subsequent decisions and behaviours of significant adults. He cites parents’ willingness to say “no” to a child at critical moments as moral lessons that would influence the child’s behaviour later in life. He shares stories, cases and personal experiences of how children could be taught to understand and manage life’s ambiguities and ironies.

Lickona (1991) advocates the teaching in

schools of two fundamental values, respect and responsibility. He feels that schools should also set their own list of target values for their pupils and then consciously set out to develop them in the young. One role of the school is to provide values and character education. Teachers will serve as caregivers, mentors and models in creating democratic, moral and caring environment, in encouraging moral reflection and discussion, and in teaching controversial issues and conflict resolution. They should also work closely with parents.

Popov et al. (1995), on the other hand, advocate that the development of virtues should be the duty of parents. They have listed at least 52 virtues to be developed in children. Among these are truthfulness, justice, trustworthiness, humility, courage, self-discipline, service and unity. Popov et al. (1995) also recommend the use of the “language of the virtues”. This is a simple “language of spirituality” where kind words are chosen to acknowledge effort and growth in the children.

The authors of this article posit that children have both a higher moral or spiritual nature (selfless nature), and a lower animalistic or instinctive nature (self-centred and/or selfish nature). Between the “good” and the “bad” is a thin line of moral choice, or volition. For example, children could choose to be truthful or to lie, to hand in their work or otherwise. Children have to be guided to make such choices, and to learn to be responsible for their choices. Parents, teachers and other adults, serve as important agents in developing morality in children. Methods used to develop morality or virtues in children have been suggested by educators and researchers in published materials. The following is a summary but by no means exhaustive.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

### *1. Set clear and reasonable boundaries.*

At an early age, children need to know the limits *before* they become autonomous decision makers. The clearer they know about what is expected, the better their chances of feeling loved and accepted in their efforts to “do the right thing”.

### *2. Teach children to make choices and act responsibly.*

At a later age, children need to be taught to make choices based on moral principles like “justice”, “truthfulness”, “trustworthiness” and “selflessness”. They must also learn to accept the consequences of their choices. Adults must refrain from imposing their will upon that of the child as this will stifle the healthy development of the child’s volition.

### *3. Guide children in moral reasoning (thinking).*

Children need to understand the reason or the logic behind moral choices. Adults must take time and have patience in explaining the rationale for a moral decision. They must help the young to rationalise if their cognitive powers are not yet fully developed.

### *4. Look out for “teachable moments” or “moral moments”.*

Adults need to look out for instances when the teaching of morals is feasible. They may teach, explain, encourage, praise, correct or celebrate, but they must *not* shame the child during these moments of moral dilemmas. Teachers may like to conduct class discussions to facilitate “moral explorations” and thus help clarify the pupils’ understanding and conceptions. Storytelling of family history and experiences, as well as open discussions about what can go wrong and why with respect to human behaviour, can serve as a resource for children to draw on as they develop their sense of moral consciousness.

### *5. Do not overprotect children from tests.*

The process of growth includes the victories, the pain and the struggle. Children must not be overprotected in times of tests or they will not be able to learn to develop their moral capacities to cope. Being good in the moral sense means being willing to keep on changing for the better. Learning and

improving require effort and practice. It is important for adults to realise that children need to have tests of higher difficulty before they could improve in their moral standards.

***6. Model virtues and be consistent in reprimands and behaviours.***

Young children learn most of their values simply by watching the adult “being”. Adults are their role models of what matters in life; not being a perfect human being but exemplifying the continual effort to fight one’s own moral/spiritual battles, to face tests and to be focused on one’s moral development.

***7. Use language of virtues and help children acquire virtues over time.***

Many adults unintentionally label children when they are angry or disappointed. Labels are limiting and they can be a form of shaming which discourage children. When children are misbehaving or acting on their lower impulses, the adults can use a kindly tongue to bring children back to the best of which they are capable. The adult then reinforces the desired virtue to be nurtured by stating it (or them) explicitly. For instance, an adult may say, “I’m trying to rest. I need quietness. Please be thoughtful and keep things quiet for the next hour.” The virtues that need to be developed are courtesy, helpfulness and thoughtfulness in this case. In another example, a parent may say to the child, “Be peaceful with your sister. If you’re angry, use your voice to tell her. Calm down, speak to your sister gently.” The virtues to be developed in the second case are peacefulness, gentleness and assertiveness. improving require effort and practice. It is important that adults realise that children need to have tests of higher difficulty before they could improve in their moral standards.

## **CONCLUSION**

Children have innate capacities to become moral beings. Significant adults like teachers and parents must help nurture them so that their moral intelligence will flourish together with their other forms of intelligences. Children have potential both to do good and evil. When left to their own

volition, they are more likely to take the path of least resistance, resorting to survival instincts. Parents and teachers need to give them plenty of guidance and encouragement for it really takes a lot of courage for one to do good, and none so to do otherwise.

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