

Moral Development in Children and Youth: Forming Catholic Conscience

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Questions for reflection

- When you think about the conscience formation of children and teens today, what concerns you most?
- What signs of hope do you see?

Chiune Sugihara

- Served as Vice-Consul for Japan in Lithuania 1939-1940
- Saved over 6000 Jews by issuing transit visas through Japan, risking his career and the lives of his family
- Proclaimed "Righteous Among the Nations" by the Israel in 1985

Some "-isms" that are pervasive in our society

- Relativism – truth is relative
- Individualism – "What's in it for me?"
- Hedonism – "If it feels good, I'll do it."
- Deism – a detached, uninvolved God
- Minimalism – "What's the least I can do?"

Happiness vs. Pleasure

- God has wired us to seek happiness.
- Happiness and pleasure are often two different things.
- Pleasure is a fleeting feeling that lasts only during the activity that produces it
- True and lasting happiness is found only in right relationship with Him, others, and self.

Decision-making and the brain

- Takes place in the frontal lobe; specifically in the prefrontal cortex
- Prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive functions
- Prefrontal cortex develops more slowly in children with ADHD
- Prefrontal cortex is not finished developing until early twenties

Structured, Systematic, Comprehensive

- Pay attention to developmental stages
- Build delay of gratification skills
- Teach problem-solving steps

Moral Development

Kohlberg's Stages

- Preconventional reasoning
 - punishment and obedience orientation
- Individualism and purpose
- Conventional reasoning
 - interpersonal norms
 - social system morality
- Postconventional Reasoning
 - Community rights vs. individual rights
 - Universal ethical principles

Why is delay of gratification important?

Stanford Marshmallow Study (Walter Mischel)

- Longitudinal study begun in 1960 with 4 year olds
- 1/3 grabbed marshmallow within seconds (impulsive)
- 1/3 were able to wait up to 20 minutes (impulse controlled)

Results of the Stanford Marshmallow Study

- Related to academic success: Impulsive children's average SAT scores in High School were 524 verbal and 528 math. Impulse controlled students' average: 610 verbal and 652 math. Delay of gratification predicts SAT scores as well as economic status and better than parents' level of education and is twice as good a predictor of later SAT scores than is IQ.
- Also related to juvenile delinquency (better predictor than IQ: Block, 1995)

Principles that give structure to the moral life

- The three criteria of a moral act (CCC, 1750)
 - "Object chosen"
 - intention
 - circumstance
- Beatitudes, commandments, works of mercy

1-2-3 Check

- What is the problem?
- What are my choices?
- Take the best action.
- Check and see: How did it work?

Question for reflection

How can we better teach the structure and guidelines of Catholic morality to children and youth at various ages and stages?

Incarnational moral catechesis

- Christocentric
- Witnessed in the life of the teacher/catechist
- Saints as Heroes of the Faith
- Multisensory methodology

Multisensory methodology

- Acting out making good choices
- Movie/media clips
- Beatitudes Billboards
- Games
- Ten Commandments Tic-Tac-Toe
- Virtues/7 Deadly Sins "Who Am I" Game

Questions for reflection

- What saints are particular examples of virtue for me? How might I share these saints with young people?
- How can we incorporate hands-on, active learning approaches to moral formation?

A communal, familial moral catechesis

- Emphasizes the common good (not the "greater good") when making moral decisions

- Equips and engages parents and families in the process
- Assists students in forming and being accountable to a community
- Class guidelines/rules
- Community discussions

Involving Families

- Main point and “Ask Me Questions”
- Information sent home with developmental content, adult level content and in context applications.

Questions for reflection

- What are the behavioral guidelines in our religious education classes? If they are not yet well defined, what would be appropriate guidelines?
- How can we let parents know what their children are learning and involve them in the process?

Helping Teens Choose the Right Path...and Avoid Risky Ones

The Family Meal – Practical Benefits

Columbia University study in 2012 and 2016 found children and teens who regularly eat with their families (5-7x per week vs. 2 or fewer)

- have lower levels of tension and stress at home
- are happier and have better peer relationships
- get better grades in school
- are more likely to confide in their parents
- have healthier eating habits
- have a lower risk of suicide
- have a much lower risk of substance abuse.

Catechists and leaders can serve an important role by helping families appreciate the value of the family meal, its connection to our faith, and the ways in which it can draw us closer together.

Risky Behaviors: Some interesting research...

- A recent, highly publicized study by Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong from University of Pennsylvania and University of Waterloo in Ontario (2010) helps us understand how to better steer adolescents away from risky behaviors such as smoking, alcohol use, and sex.
- Jemmott and colleagues demonstrated that programs for prevention of risky behaviors should not be fear-based, but are more effective when they are goal-focused, encourage critical thinking, and allow group discussion of the issues involved.

An invitational, person- centered moral catechesis

- Be attentive to the unique needs of your learners
- Invite them to be their best selves
- Call out and nurture their gifts and talents

Questions for reflection

- How can we help young learners discover and listen for the voice of God in their own lives?
- How should catechists and teachers react to questions or challenges from their learners? What skills would help them react in a more productive way when challenged?