

## **JACK'S CORNER**

**QUESTION:** I'm concerned about my child's sense of right and wrong. He seems only concerned with avoiding the consequences, not whether an action is good or bad. How can I help him understand that consequences aren't the only point?

**ANSWER:** Depending on a child's age, he may not have reached that point in his moral development. Just as there are physical and cognitive developmental stages, there are stages of moral development. A person's moral development is slow and progressive:

1. From birth to about 4 years old, a child's sense of moral reasoning centers on self. "I am the center of the universe. What is right is what I want." The reason a child chooses to be good is to get rewards and avoid punishment.
2. Around kindergarten age, a child usually comes to understand that he should do what he is told by authorities to avoid punishment and get rewards. "Doing what I am told to do is right. What adults say is right."
3. In early elementary school, the child's becomes acutely aware of the effect of moral choices on self. "What's in it for me?" The child's perceived view of "fairness" is a major factor in his/her view of morality. "What is fair is right."
4. During middle school and early teens, the child begins to see value in the opinions of important people in his/her life. "I should live up to the expectations of adults I admire. I should do good to people I like, so that I can feel good about myself."
5. Often, during high school, the young adult expands his/her responsibility to include society. "I have obligations to society. It is right to fulfill those obligations. I should do my part."
6. Sometime around a person's late teens or college years, he/she learns the value of all people, understanding that all people have rights and are intrinsically valuable. "I should be good to satisfy my conscience."
7. As Christians, hopefully we go even beyond stage 6 to a point where we have "denied ourselves" and "taken up our cross" to follow in the way of Jesus. "I am not the point of the universe. God is. I can live for God and others, because I am well-loved by God." We love, because he first loved us (1 JN. 4:19). Christians are "good" (We try to keep God's law.) because we have been loved first. Out of gratitude to God, we are free to do good works. Because God sent his only Son to die for us, self-esteem is moot... it is a given...we have neither the need nor the desire to dwell on any aspect of self.

I wish everyone automatically progressed through all these stages, but alas, we all know 40-year-olds stuck in stage 1 or 3.

How can a parent help his child move through these stages?

1. Understand moral development so you can know the mind and heart of your child. A parent cannot “push” a child through these stages, but he can create opportunities for his child to seize.
2. Make appropriate allowances for age. (Asking a 2-year-old: “How would you feel if someone did that to you?” has little value.)
3. Teaching by example is a parent’s most effective tool.
4. Help your child learn to think critically and evaluate decisions based on the morality found in Scripture. Foster the idea that morality is not an opinion.
5. Give your child responsibilities that have moral outcomes. (e.g. picking up trash at a neighborhood park, babysitting young siblings etc.)
6. Teach your child God’s law (letter and spirit).
7. Love your child through touch, words, time and prayer.

Jack Lipski, M.A.

SOTHCS Counselor

(Permission granted to copy for personal use only.)