Moral Development: An Important Factor of Social Development

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Moral development is an essential period during every person’s—especially adolescents’—development. Moral development and reasoning allows an individual to differentiate their own ideas and moral responsibilities while gaining a better understanding of larger social structures (Berk, 2008). Moral development is also the period when individuals, more so adolescents, begin to make fair and balanced solutions to moral problems (Berk, 2008). Moral development theory stemmed from Lawrence Kohlberg—influenced highly from Piaget. There are six stages of development which are divided among 3 levels—preconventional, conventional, postconventional. Like with all forms of development there are many influences that affect moral development—such as culture, peer interaction, and religion. Although, there have been some criticisms that have been stated with moral development as well.

Before one can talk about moral development, the overall concept of “development” should be looked at first, especially child development—considering moral development is just one aspect of development. Child Development, in essence, is the study of “understanding all aspects of human constancy and change from conception through adolescence” (Berk, p.4). Development is constantly happening during the lifespan of a child—as well as the adult—and there are many things that affect a child’s development. Whether it’s the constant love from a parent, or the constant exposure to hostility in the household, the littlest thing, or even the biggest, can have a long term affect on a child. As a result from love and compassion, a child can have enhanced self-esteem while a negative home environment can result in violent outbursts or tantrums from an adolescent. These are just two examples of how development can be affected—both positively and negatively. Many people may understand how a child may be developing but not know why, which is why it’s crucial to look at all the factors a child is exposed to in order to understand the why factor in development.

Development is typically divided into three domains, which overlap and interact with each other: physical development, cognitive development, and emotional/social development (Berk, 2008). Physical development is changes in the body, as well as functioning, and motor capacities. Cognitive development looks at changes in intellectual habits, imagination and
creativity, memory, and language. Emotional/social development looks at changes in understanding of oneself, interpersonal skills, friendships, and moral reasoning—which is where Lawrence Kohlberg and Moral Development come in.

Lawrence Kohlberg is well known for his work on Moral Development. In fact, Kohlberg was inspired by the work of Jean Piaget furthering his interest in moral development. Kohlberg is most known for his Structural Stage Model of moral development—to be discussed later on-- which followed Piaget’s theory of structured developmental stages (McDonough, 2005). The Structural Stage Model consists of six stages that “describe unique modes of reasoning about justice in interpersonal relationships (McDonough, p.199). Kohlberg’s interest in moral development started when he began looking at studies that looked at the effect of moral discussions and conversations on moral reasoning and development—creating a moral atmosphere (McDonough, 2005). This particular work inspired the creation of Just Community schools where both teachers and students were participants in discussions based on the justice issues within the school. This led to Kohlberg’s larger body of work towards “consideration of social factors” (2005).

Why is moral development important for understanding overall development? Moral development is one of the essential aspects of overall development. Yes, physical and cognitive play a pretty significant role but they don’t help us, as educators, understand how a child begins to understand right and wrong, ethical problem solving, or complex society. Moral development allows children and adolescents to shape their opinions and learn from their environment to create their own ideas of what should be done—fairly, justly, and balanced (Berk, 2008). According to Berk, adolescents’ experience in society and with peers helps them to better understand “larger social structures”. It’s important to know that moral development doesn’t happen at the same rate for every person. It can take a child longer to understand what is morally right or wrong than another whether it is because of developmental delay or other mental issue. Regardless, exposure to outside circumstances is the major factor to affect moral development—these factors will be looked at shortly.
What does moral development entail? Following Lawrence Kohlberg, moral development consists of three levels—two stages per level (Berk, 2008). The First Level, the Preconventional Level, looks at how children are accepting of authority figures and the rules that they address. Children also base their behaviors or judgments by consequences—bad behaviors result in punishment while good behaviors result in praise and reward (2008). Stage 1, at the Preconventional Level, children avoid punishment by focusing on rules of the authority figures around them—therefore, behaving morally. The second stage, like the first in the Preconventional Level, focuses on the self as well. The child is looking out for his or her best interests and interests in others will only further their own personal needs (2008).

The Second Level is the Conventional Level, where children begin to step away from self-interest. Stage 3, during the Conventional Level, children begin to understand that abiding by “social norms” forms positive relationships and they want to keep those relationships by being a good person (2008). They also understand that they should treat others the way that they, themselves, would want to be treated. At stage four in the Conventional Level, children and adolescents understand that it is vital to obey societal laws and that everyone has a duty to abide by those laws and rules—making society more orderly and cooperative (2008).

The Third Level, the Postconventional Level, adolescents begin to define morality in terms of abstract principles and values that are applied to all societies and situations (2008). In this level, Stage 5 looks at how rules and laws can be changed to meet the better good of society. Stage 6 looks at how ethical principles have worth and respect of every person (2008).

How does Kohlberg’s Six Stage Model help understand moral development—and development—as a whole? Kohlberg’s model acts as a process or guide to show how an individual is developing both morally and socially. Most individuals go through each stage during the lifespan and it describes how an individual can start as self-centered and not being able to consider other points of view to being able to have concern for the well being of others while having a duty to follow order.
Moral development happens through the entire life course. However, moral development seems to have the biggest affect during the early years. As mentioned earlier, children develop morally based on all experiences in their lives whether it’s with family, peers, school, media, etc. It helps to understand moral development by looking at factors and influences that can affect development—throughout early childhood and adolescence.

One important aspect to look at with children’s moral development is peer interaction. Peer interaction is essential for when it comes to development, not only with just moral development but with all aspects of development. Peers influence the way a child thinks, acts, and looks. Children learn and experience through their peers and they begin to understand themselves through interaction with their peers—they begin to understand the “complex society” (Berk, 2008). In early childhood, peers become the extension of a child’s social world outside of the family and interact through pretend or dramatic play (Langdale, 1993). The dramatic play allows children to express their feelings and lets them react to the imagination of another peer. As time goes on, children begin to talk more critically and give gender specific insight, such as mother/father roles and what friendship means (Langdale, 1993). As children spend more time with their peers they begin to develop a self-concept and start to put together their own ideas and insight of the world.

Also, children begin to understand gender roles by associating with same-sex peers. In early childhood, boys and girls are typically cognitively “inept” to understand what being a boy or a girl means (Langdale, 1993). In essence, boys and girls further their curiosity by associating with same-sex peers to understand gender roles and the psychology of gender (Langdale, 1993).

When children become older they begin to learn the importance of compromise and teamwork. With this new idea they learn that interactions become more positive when people work together as opposed to against each other (Berk, 2008), and allow children to form closer friendships.
Family dynamics is another important aspect to look at when dealing with moral development. Parents, today, have an enormous influence on the development of their children. Most children learn from their parents and imitating their behaviors is a common action because they look up to their parents and want to be like them—in most cases, when growing up. A parent’s everyday presence within the household can have a positive affect on a child’s moral development. When a parent is constantly involved with the child’s life moral discussions can happen more frequent than if the parent was not present (Berk, 2008). According to Pratt, Skoe, & Arnold (2004), when an adolescent’s parents thoroughly listen and ask clarifying questions they gain the most in moral reasoning. Whereas, if a parent uses punishment, frequently scolds, and makes sarcastic remarks, the child shows little to no change in moral development (Walker & Taylor, 1991a).

There are typically special bonds between the child and each of his or her parents. The child learns most of right and wrong through the teachings of their parents. A son might learn about how to respect the opposite sex from their father while a daughter might learn to stick up for herself towards the opposite sex from their mother. The child learns so much from their parents which helps shape their moral reasoning and self-concept. However, if the parents were not around the child would have to learn such things on his or her own making it hard for the child to develop proper moral reason. As a result a child can turn to the streets looking for the love and affection that was lost in the home, such as gangs. Even though a child can feel love and affection from fellow gang members, often they are misled and what they think is morally right, in fact, only hurts themselves—such as violence. It’s important to understand the affect parental influence, or lack thereof, has on a child’s moral development.

Culture also has a significant effect on every aspect of the lifespan, especially moral development. Culture shapes who we are as individuals and inherit the beliefs and attitudes of our family. When it comes to Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, it is noted that individuals who grow up in industrialized nations move through the stages more rapidly than and attain a higher level than individuals who grow up in village societies (Berk, 2008). Children
who are part of an industrialized nation can have a better understanding of complex societies and
develop a more complex moral understanding, whereas village child won’t have the exposure to
a complex society (Berk, 2008). But with culture comes different views of “moral conception”,
and different cultures have different moral beliefs. With Eastern countries, they value group over
individuals and honor hard work over self promotion (Jackson et al., 2008). However, Western
countries value the individual over the group and honor self-promotion.

When looking at countries such as China and the United States, both have very different
cultures and a different moral conception. At study conducted by Jackson et al compared the
cultures of China and the United States. Results showed that Chinese youth valued positive
moral character more than U.S. youth; U.S. youth play video games and use cell phones more
than Chinese youth; and Chinese females had the highest level of moral behavior, followed by
U.S. girls and U.S. and Chinese boys. The study shows how different the two cultures are and
what is valued. Having two completely different cultures can affect moral development in two
different ways. Being more group oriented can lead children to understand that groups and
society are very important and moral discussions and ideas can come about within a group arena.
Whereas a more individual oriented child can possibly delay the moral development stages when
compared to a group oriented child. An individual oriented child may take more time to
understand and grasp the later stages of development. For example in Israel, students are given
training in governance within their community. By the time they are in the third grade they bring
up concerns about societal rules and laws when discussing moral concepts than U.S. children
(Fuchs et al., 1986). Why is culture important for understanding development as a whole?
Culture shapes the ideas and attitudes of every individual. Culture helps them do what is right
and what is wrong and what is accepted and not accepted (Jackson et al., 2008). Next to peers
and parental interaction, culture is the next important aspect that affects development. What one
culture believes to be morally right can be wrong when looking at another culture and every
moral attitude and behavior is different.
Perhaps one of the most important factors of moral development has to be religious involvement. Religions have many different morals and beliefs that individuals go by on a daily basis. Similar to the culture aspect, religion teaches children valuable moral lessons that can impact their lives as they grow older. Even though adolescents begin to decrease their involvement with religion, the ones that stay involved benefit more. Adolescents that remain religiously active obtain more moral values and learn more appropriate behavior (Berk, 2008). They tend to be more involved within their respected communities and help out individuals who are less fortunate (2008). Also, it promotes stronger and more positive relationships with peers while decreasing dishonest behavior. According to Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, religious involvement results in a lower level of drug and alcohol use and delinquency.

Religion shapes development and gives a child more understanding of themselves. It allows another opportunity to hear ideas and values and compare them to their own—again shaping their own self-knowledge. Religion allows adolescents to be social while discussing moral ideas and concepts as well as helping them make decisions on things they would like and not like to do in their life.

Moral development can only be an asset for all school counselors. Understanding the moral reasoning of any student will give a counselor an in depth look of the development of a child. Lawrence Kohlberg’s Six Stages of Moral Development offers a great foundation for school counselors to look at see where their students fit within the different stages. Like with all development, not all students will meet each stage at the same time. Again, like with all development, many factors inhibit a person’s moral development. Whether it’s peer interaction, family involvement, culture, or religion, these all have to be taken into account when looking at the moral development of a child. A child obtains his or her own moral reasoning and beliefs from many different places and a counselor has to be aware of where they get them and what factors affects those same beliefs. Yes, all factors of development are important—but it’s moral development that allows us make our own reasoning to move towards a fair, just, and balanced solution to moral problems (Berk, 2008).
References


