

Learning Right & Wrong...

Lifelong Mental Health Management: Middle Childhood

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Children learn 'rules of life' by studying parents

Learning right from wrong – or moral development – begins with toddlers and preschoolers and involves a child's reasoning, feelings and behaviours.

While infants have no sense of morality, toddlers and preschoolers begin to develop rules by studying their parents and other authority figures.

Initially, children believe that what's "right" is entirely decided by those in authority. However, during middle childhood, they begin to recognize that those same moral rules can be applied to all relationships – including their peers.

For example, this allows children to apply moral rules to a game situation and decide the winners and losers in a manner that they all consider fair.

Early behaviour

- ◆ *Parents of preschoolers should understand that children are not being willfully dishonest when they "cheat."*
- ◆ *Young children have a difficult time understanding other's points of view.*
- ◆ *Parents can still encourage children to think about "how the other person feels," even if it takes the child a while to grasp the concept.*

Supporting your child's moral development

- ◆ Be open with your feelings.
- ◆ Set clear expectations.
- ◆ Communicate these expectations clearly.
- ◆ Identify and reward positive behaviour in your child.
- ◆ Apologize for your own errors.
- ◆ Provide children with a rationale for your requests and demands. For example, saying "do it because I say so," only teaches the child that moral rules are dictated by those who have power.
- ◆ Point out the effect of your child's behaviour on others.
- ◆ Be careful to indicate that it is the child's behaviour and its consequences for others that are at issue and not whether the child is a worthwhile person. This will ensure that the child understands that he/she can do better by behaving better.