

DOC
ZTA245.7
B873

B-1460

no. 1460

ur Child From 6 to 12: Social and Moral Development



Your Child From 6 to 12: Social and Moral Development

Dolores A. Stegelin and Suzanne Krogh*

Introduction

Bringing up children to think and behave in socially acceptable ways isn't easy. Traits such as telling the truth, obeying rules and being willing to share or help don't come automatically to children. They need help and guidance from their parents with these as well as with other social behaviors such as keeping promises and respecting others' property. The elementary school years are especially important for guiding children socially because peer pressure to follow the group begins during this time.

How Parents Can Help

- Treat all members of the family the same way you want the child to treat others.
- Point out positive behavior at home, on TV, in public. Give your reasons for approval.
- When your child behaves as you want him or her to, show your approval and appreciation.
- Avoid lecturing about what is good; conduct a two-way conversation instead.
- Ask the child what he or she thinks and feels.

The Children's Viewpoint

Learning the adult reasons for social behavior takes time. Children gain understanding through experience. When you ask your child how he or she feels about a problem or idea, always ask, "Why do you think that?" You may be surprised by the response.

For example, one mother asked her 8-year-old daughter, "Why are you going to give all your friends the same number of candies?"

The child responded, "Because it's good for everybody to get the same."

The mother felt pleased, but she experimented with one more "why." She asked, "Why should everybody have the same?"

"Because," came the surprising answer. "It's like a division problem. The candies look right if they're all in the same piles."

*respectively, Extension family life specialist, The Texas A&M University System, and professor, early childhood education, University of Florida, Gainesville.

The mother then realized that some lessons in the real reasons for sharing would be needed. If she hadn't asked "why" that extra time, she might never have learned.

Lectures

Parents often want so strongly for their children to behave in socially acceptable ways that they deliver long lectures. The children increasingly tune them out.

Indoctrination and punishment don't work either. Fear and threats may change a child's behavior, but only temporarily. The child will not understand the reasons for acceptable behavior. Toward the end of elementary school he or she may begin to rebel, listening only to the persuasive arguments of peers.

A teacher once asked a second-grade boy why it was important to share. "Because my father said so," the child responded, "and he must be right because he's a preacher."

The teacher decided to try that extra "why" question. "Do you know why a preacher would think it's good to share?"

"No," the boy answered. "He's never told me why, but I know I'd better do it or he'll give me a whipping!"

With the best of intentions this father must have been lecturing, indoctrinating and punishing. And the child probably did as required, but didn't understand why any more than the girl who shared because she liked the mathematical layout of evenly divided candy.

Some Ideas That Can Work

If lecturing, indoctrination and punishment don't teach a child the principles of acceptable behavior, what will?

Each child is different and needs to be dealt with differently. No one knows your children better than you do, and here is a good chance to get to know them even better, while helping them at the same time.

- Your children need to learn to see things from others' points of view, to put themselves in other people's places. Most children should be able to do this fairly well when they are 10 years old. First and second graders may still have trouble with this skill, and you can help them with some questioning and listening.

"Do you know how Mike felt when you hit him? What would you think if someone borrowed *your* bike without asking?" are typical questioning strategies.

- Your children need to think about long-term consequences for their actions. Again, you can help with questioning and listening.

"If you take all those candies and don't share any, what do you think will happen when everyone comes back?" "What will Mr. Johnson think when he comes home and

finds you've destroyed some plants while playing frisbee in his yard?"

- Your children need to know that you respect their ideas and are willing to listen to their point of view. In this way, parental lectures become conversations, and the child can accept the parent's ideas.

For example, "I noticed that you kids had trouble working out a fair way to take turns at bat today. What do you think the trouble was?"

- If you are angered by your child's behavior, let the child know it. However, cool down first so that you can remember the importance of conversing rather than lecturing. The child may think he or she has a legitimate defense. He or she may simply not understand why you feel differently.

Helping children to make wise decisions and to develop a sense of right and wrong challenges any parents. As children mature, parents find new ways to guide them. As children grow from 6 to 12 years of age, their needs change.

Ages 6 and 7

Children who are 6 and 7 are just beginning to understand the importance of social behavior. This marks an important stage in the development of your child.

What Parents Can Expect

- Children begin to care more about what their friends think than about their parents or teachers.

- Children look to their parents as authorities, but not unquestioningly as they did when younger. They see parents as *deserving* of respect because their parents care for them.

- Awareness that people deserve or earn respect enables children to look to others, even their peers, as authorities.

- Children begin to form groups or teams or gangs. These may last for short periods before new groups will form.

- Children begin to understand how their actions make other people feel.

- Children may tattle a lot because they are newly interested in social interactions; they want to clarify what is correct or expected.

- Children are fascinated by rules, sometimes even obsessed by them. (This fascination causes much of their tattling.)

- Some children want to share everything with total equality, no matter what the circumstances. Later, they will share on the basis of merit, or reciprocity. Again, this is the idea of other people earning or deserving respect.

How Parents Can Help

- Listen with interest to your child's new enthusiasm for stories about friends.
- Express warmth and caring even though your child only seems more interested in what friends are doing than in your relationship with him or her. The child will be grateful to have you when he or she needs you.
- If your child strikes up a friendship with children you don't approve of, be patient. Other friends will probably be added soon.
- If tattling is excessive, decide when it is permissible and under what conditions. Discuss this with your child and offer gentle reminders.
- Remind your child to think about others by asking questions, such as, "How do you think that will make her feel?"
- Read your child stories in which the main character has to make a difficult social decision. (Many stories of this type are available. Your librarian can help you find some.) Talk about the character's problems and how the decisions were reached.
- When you share with or help a friend, relative or neighbor, mention it to your child and explain your reasons for your helpfulness. If your child is interested, discuss the incident.
- When your child helps or is asked to help with a task, explain why his or her help is important to you.

Ages 8, 9 and 10

This stage of childhood is marked by continued awareness of social behavior. As children mature mentally, they begin to understand that all people have similar feelings and needs. They also become more aware of individual differences.

What Parents Can Expect

- Social adjustment is probably easiest for the child at this age.
- Parents are still important, but often children care more about what their friends think.
- Children begin to understand ambivalence, or mixed feelings. Ambivalence helps them see that decisions are not any easier for others to make.
- Children may not be as interested in sharing things equally as they are in being sure that everyone's needs and wants are served.
- Children can begin to see the long-term consequences of being dishonest or disobeying rules.
- Generally, boys want to play with boys, and girls with girls.

- Obeying rules in games is important, but children can begin to understand that rules can sometimes be flexible.

- Because of this increased flexibility, children tattle less than they did when younger.

- Keeping promises and being kind and generous are important qualities in friends.

- Children like to choose their own leaders or captains. Their sense of equality and justice in games is developing.

How Parents Can Help

- Look for opportunities to talk with your child about mixed feelings. For example, a relative who visits may behave differently than the rest of the family, yet the family still cares for and loves that relative. (Grandpa refuses to change clothes very often.)

- Encourage the child to see people as individuals. Demonstrate how to meet the needs of these individuals.

- Demonstrate how to be a good friend by showing the child how to make a telephone call, write personal notes and express appreciation.

- Look for opportunities to talk about feelings. Provide situations in which your child can see people in many social settings, and talk about their needs and feelings. For example, visit an older relative in a nursing home or a neighbor with a new baby.

Ages 11 and 12

The ages of 11 and 12 are important in relation to social behavior and moral decisionmaking. The influence of peers is increasing, and young adolescents need to know how to express their feelings in a positive way. Parents can help their children become more assertive by demonstrating how to express feelings in a constructive way and by allowing young adolescents to make their own decisions.

What Parents Can Expect

- Peer pressure can be intense, and children want to be able to ask their parents for guidance.

- Some children may hide their concerns about their peers' behavior from their parents.

- Changes in bodily appearance may be a source of both pride and social embarrassment.

- The opposite sex becomes more important in terms of either interest, anxiety or dislike.

- Friendships may be strong and loyalties fierce.

- Children may want to make decisions and friends independent of their parents' approval.

- For some children, being with a parent in public can be embarrassing.

- A few children will begin to enjoy philosophical discussions on social issues. Most will prefer to discuss current issues. They will always want parents to listen to their point of view and take it seriously.
- In complex social situations, children are sometimes able to get outside of their own ego-centered point of view and see how each person involved feels.
- Conformity to the opinions and values of social groups is important.
- Living up to expectations, either those of the family or of others at school, is valued.

How Parents Can Help

- Listen sympathetically to your child's problems, then be prepared to listen more.
- Before passing judgment on a child's social decisions or ideas, discuss his or her point of view. Ask the questions that will give you the most information about how your child is perceiving a situation.
- Let your child know through words and actions that you are always ready to discuss problems, but try not to be too pushy or overbearing.
- If your child is about to make a decision you disapprove of, discuss the consequences of his or her actions. Ask how each individual involved may be affected. Discuss alternatives that may be more acceptable to both of you and to everyone else involved.
- If your child is beginning to philosophize, listen respectfully and remember that these are beginning efforts at abstract thought. Be patient.
- Be tolerant of some unusual clothing and other styles if "everyone" is using them. Save the hard and fast rules for issues of critical importance.
- Continue to offer warmth and physical affection although your child may no longer initiate them. Let your child know that you do love him or her.

For Additional Information

- Dunfee, M. and Crump, C. *Teaching for Social Values in Social Studies*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Childhood Education International, 1974.
- Schuncke, G. and Krogh, S. *Helping Children Choose*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1983.
- Warren, R. *Caring: Supporting Children's Growth*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1977.
- Williams, J. and Stith, M. *Middle Childhood Behavior and Development*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974.

Materials related to child and adolescent development may also be obtained at:

- The county Extension office nearest you;
- your local library;
- the county or city health department;
- local school counselors.

Educational programs conducted by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, handicap or national origin.

Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, The Texas A&M University System and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914.
5M-10-83, New