



# **Promoting Moral Development through Social Interest in Children and Adolescents**

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The cognitive-developmental viewpoint espoused by Lawrence Kohlberg defines the qualitative changes in thinking that occur as an individual moves from one developmental stage to another. These changes, which include cognitive and emotional components, involve ways of thinking about self, of relating to others, and of making judgments about right and wrong (Kohlberg & Wasserman, 1980). But Kohlberg's ideas fall short of providing adequate direction about how moral development can be nurtured. Adlerian theory, which illuminates the themes that characterize the human experience and suggests how moral development can be promoted through social interest, provides such a framework. The purpose of this article is to suggest ways in which well-established Adlerian methods to help children, such as those articulated by Dreikurs (1964), and well-known applications to the educational setting, such as those published by Muro and Dinkmeyer (1977), can foster the moral development.

## **Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development**

Kohlberg's stage theory is based on five propositions. First, development occurs in an invariant sequence (Kohlberg, 1981b), that is, development moves forward and occurs in a stepwise fashion (stages cannot be skipped or sidestepped as lower stages are the building blocks for higher stages).

Second, stages are hierarchical integrations (Kohlberg, 1981b) where thinking at higher stages includes and comprehends the stages below it. Third, stages are structural wholes and organized systems of thought with consistency within each level of moral judgment. Fourth, movement to higher stages of development can be facilitated through exposure to enriching experiences (Gibbs, 1977). Fifth, stages are universally common to members of a species from birth to maturity (Gibbs, 1977).

Research findings support some of Kohlberg's propositions. Longitudinal studies of moral development (Kohlberg, 1981a) have revealed that individuals either stay at the same level or move to a higher level of moral development over time. Rest (1973) reported that individuals prefer to function at the moral orientation of the highest level that they are capable of understanding. Thus, the capacity to function at different levels of morality follows an invariant, developmental sequence. Moral development has also been shown to coincide with Piaget's sequence of cognitive development. In fact, advanced moral reasoning is dependent upon advanced logical reasoning (Kohlberg & Wasserman, 1980).

To confirm the universality of Kohlberg's stages, urban boys in the United States, Taiwan, and Mexico were compared. Kohlberg (1981a) found they progressed through the same stages of moral development but at different rates. Boys in Mexico and Taiwan progressed at slower rates than did American boys. Similarly, middle-class children were found to move faster and farther in moral development than did lower-class children (Kohlberg, 1981a). Significant differences in moral development, however, have not been found among different religious groups—Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Moslems, or atheists. Thus, although the sequence of development appears invariant, the rate of development appears to be influenced by sociocultural factors.

**Kohlberg's Stages.** Kohlberg (1981a) identified three levels of moral development, each with two stages. The Preconventional Level consists of Stage 1 (ages 5-7) where physical consequences determine the goodness or badness of an action and of Stage 2 (ages 8-12) where equal sharing, reciprocity, and fairness are understood but loyalty and justice are not. In Stage 3 (ages 13-16) of the Conventional Level, conformity to a stereotypical standard is preeminent—the adolescent strives to fit in and, for the first time, judges others by their intentions as well as their actions. Individuals in the second stage of this level, Stage 4 (ages 16+), recognize the need for social order, have a sense of duty, and show respect for authority. The third level, the Postconventional, Autonomous or Principled level, is defined by an awareness of individual rights and societal standards (the legal point of view), and Stage 5 (adulthood) is best exemplified by the Constitution where truth is sought beyond the "letter of the law." Stage 6 (adulthood)

represents moral thinking that respects the dignity of all human beings and that is guided by universal considerations of justice, reciprocity, and human rights. Kohlberg also postulated a seventh stage that encompasses ethical and religious considerations on a larger scope than the other stages. Individuals who reach this stage find cosmic harmony by asking and answering questions such as "Why be moral? Why be just in a universe filled with injustice, suffering and death?" (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 249).

### **Adlerian Theory**

Social interest is a central construct in Adlerian theory. Crandall (1978) asserts that Adler's early concept of social interest was a valuing of things other than self. As Adler modified his view of social interest, it became an essential component of the healthy personality. Crandall (1980) suggests that social interest influences a person's attention, perception, thinking, and overt behaviors as these relate to cooperation, helping, sharing, and contributing.

Crandall's discussion of social interest also takes into account the relationship of social interest to Adler's key motivational construct, "striving for superiority." In its most healthy form, the "striving for superiority" is described as a motive toward completion, fulfillment, or perfection, and is characteristic of all life (Adler, 1939).

For Adler (Crandall, 1980), the most personally satisfying form of striving for superiority is the blending of this motive with social interest. By contrast, when individuals lack concern for others (social interest), problems with family, work, and friendships inevitably follow (Ansbacher, 1968; Crandall, 1980) leading to feelings of competition, alienation, insecurity, and inferiority. These feelings create a vicious cycle of striving for personal superiority rather than working in community with others. A deficit in social interest is a major factor in the etiology of any form of psychological pathology (Crandall, 1980).

Adler saw the classroom as a place where children could practice social interest. Class group discussions oiled the path for democracy in action (Dreikurs, Brunwald, & Pepper, 1982), creating an atmosphere where children gained insight into the purposes and consequences of their behavior.

Dreikurs et al. (1982), carrying forward the tradition established by Adler, saw the democratic classroom as a place of equality and mutual respect, of cooperation and consideration, and of free expression and genuine listening. The democratic classroom was a microcosm of a socially democratic society with students and teachers sharing the responsibility for decision making. Children in this classroom learned through participa-

tion rather than compliance. Social interest evolved naturally because problems were approached in a spirit of community and cooperation.

Similar to Adler's and Dreikurs' use of the classroom, Beyer (1976), Mosher and Sprinthall (1973), and Wasserman (1976) have spearheaded attempts to apply Kohlberg's ideas within the school setting. The most prominent of these attempts is the Cluster School, a project in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where a school-within-a-school was created around the theme of participatory school governance. The Cluster School was an attempt to stimulate moral development by exposing students to moral conflicts and by giving them a chance to see the perspective of others via role taking, so that higher stages of moral reasoning could be experienced within the context of group decision making (Kohlberg & Wasserman, 1980; Wasserman, 1976).

### **Theory into Practice**

A paradigm we use in selecting classroom methods is: pace, link, and lead. Pacing means choosing methods that can be assimilated and incorporated into a child's existing cognitive and emotional framework. Linking makes a transition to the next level of morality or thought. Leading includes teaching, modeling, and encouraging children to reach for higher levels of social interest. Illustrations of how this paradigm is used are presented next.

**The Preconventional Level-Stage One.** Children in the early elementary grades are perception-bound, egocentric thinkers and trial-and-error problem solvers. Common blocks to their thinking include centration blocks where they are unable to see more than one aspect of the problem; reversibility blocks where perceptions prevail over abstract realities; transformation blocks where cause-and-effect relationships are often not understood, that is, where children often find it hard to predict the consequences of their behavior in terms of its effect on themselves and others; and egocentrism blocks where they tend to assume everyone sees things the same way they do, even in the face of contradictory evidence (Thompson & Rudolph, 1988). The goodness or badness of actions at this level of development is judged on perceived physical consequences.

These children respond well to symbolic presentations of moral dilemmas. Stories, fables, and fairy tales readily capture their attention. Puppets, toy animals, and cartoon figures are easily accommodated by their active imaginations. Children identify with the protagonist and vicariously experience these symbolic presentations of social living. To promote moral development, these symbolic representations highlight social interest as the most lasting, meaningful resolution to moral dilemmas.

Symbolic narratives should emphasize perceptual and sensory detail to pace with the cognitive development of these children. The resolution that social interest brings to the dilemmas in this narrative can be highlighted after its presentation by a series of questions that helps structure the children's thinking about the story. Also, the story can be presented in a modified form where shades of gray are introduced and where the consequences of cooperative behavior can be highlighted. To illustrate with the "Boy Who Cried Wolf," upon first hearing the story, most children see the boy's behavior as very bad and most firmly believe that they would never act in such a dastardly manner. Questions such as, "Was it fair to others for the boy to get attention by making up stories about the wolf?," "What are some better ways for this boy to get attention?," and "What might the boy's friends have done to help so he wouldn't have wanted to make up the wolf stories?" challenge children to see the moral dilemma in terms of reciprocity, empathy, and fairness—aspects of social interest.

The classroom milieu provides daily opportunities for learning social interest. Teachers can pace with their cognitive style by posting pictures which depict classroom rules. When punishment is needed, the teacher can pace with these children by being consistent, by making the logical or natural consequences tangible, and by highlighting the advantages of pro-social behavior whenever they appear. To counteract discouragement, teachers can give examples of how some of their past students overcame difficulties. For example, the teacher might go to a time-out area where a student has been placed and start a story by saying, "Bob, I'd like to tell you a story about a student I had many years ago. . . ."

**Preconventional Level-Stage Two.** Eight-to-twelve-year-old children have learned the importance of sharing, fairness, and reciprocity but loyalty and justice often elude them. Most are concrete thinkers (perception bound), but many of the blocks to thinking cited earlier have gradually disappeared. These children can appreciate the viewpoint of others. A common moral issue with this age group revolves around how dyads can form a pact that is self-serving but not detrimental to others. Methods used earlier can be modified to reflect this developmental readiness.

Mutual storytelling is a viable method to use with these children. The teacher begins a story, and the students each contribute something to it. Students are asked to frame questions that highlight the moral issues of the story. "What if . . ." scenarios can be explored. Because of their increased ability to empathize, role-playing is often an effective means of dramatizing how social interest promotes moral development.

Class discussions assume increased sophistication, and a democratic spirit within the class can be linked to tangible decision making. To illustrate, teachers could invite their class to discuss what procedure should be

followed when it is time to line up for lunch. This age group will readily appreciate the unfairness of having the row closest to the door always being first in line.

Social interest can be facilitated by having students work in dyads. The teacher defines successful completion of the project as a cooperative effort where each member of the dyad makes a unique contribution to the effort but also helps the other person in the dyad.

Social interest can be promoted by encouraging students to become involved in school projects that serve the community, e.g., collecting aluminum cans. The concept of justice and loyalty to the community could be introduced by having students donate the earnings from this effort to local charities.

Thus, at this age, the students' readiness to form alliances based on reciprocity and fairness is capitalized on (paced with), and activities are structured so that loyalty to a larger reference group is learned. School buttons, shirts, songs, and mottos encourage students to develop a feeling of belonging, loyalty, and pride in their school.

**Conventional Level-Stages Three and Four.** Most secondary school children are capable of formal thought (abstract thinking), and identification with groups is common, though dyadic relationships remain important. The moral imperative of the junior high student is conformity to norms and standards. Younger adolescents (stage three) ask, "Do I measure up?" and "Who am I?" Older adolescents (stage four) often become aware of social injustices, and many become quite assertive in their views on politics, civil rights, national policy and the like. Lively class discussions are important at this age. We use the following guidelines for having class discussions: (a) allow free discussion about the dilemma without judgment; (b) invite perspective taking by asking students to verbalize the ideas of their classmates; (c) include brainstorming and providing alternatives at a higher level of thinking; (d) encourage students to evaluate alternatives in terms of consequences; (e) link decision making with a plan of action; and (f) follow-up by some type of social action as a means of providing support and encouragement for continued exploration of social and moral issues.

Narrative learning for the adolescent often comes from reading literature or viewing classic films. Counselors can collaborate with English teachers to stimulate students' thought about such questions relevant to social interest such as, "Am I my brother's keeper?" or "Can suffering add meaning to life?"

It is important to strengthen the link between moral reasoning, social responsibility, and action (Wallin, 1980). School governance offers a rich opportunity for this linkage. Student council and advisory committees are

good examples of where students can assume a role in decision making and test their values. Social responsibility can also be exercised through clubs, debate teams, team sports, and community organizations such as Boy Scouts.

Community service is another means of translating social interest into action. It is a meaningful success experience for most students because they are treated with added respect in their leadership role and because students assume ownership for efforts that they perceive as voluntary rather than compulsory. Students can be asked to become involved with a community agency as a means of gathering information for a theme or for a feature story in the school newspaper. They could become involved in peer counseling or serve as a helper on a teen-talk line. Community service can reduce alienation and promote a sense of belonging.

### **Conclusions**

We see a pressing need—given the problems confronting us with substance abuse, broken homes, and poverty—for schools to assume greater leadership in promoting moral development. Yet the emphasis of the reform movement is on academic achievement. This article attempts to spotlight the importance of social interest as a means of fostering moral development, drawing on some of the well-established Adlerian methods that promote social interest in the school setting. As children develop intellectually, they are able to comprehend and experience social interest with increasing sophistication. Their actions also become more sophisticated as the manifestation of social interest evolves from one-on-one interactions to the community at large. *Moral development develops from a rich exposure to social interest brought to life in the classroom through films, books, class discussions, projects, and community involvement.*

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