Parental Impact on the Moral Development of Young Children

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The process of moral development in children has been widely debated by psychologists, educators, philosophers, researchers, and religious leaders. What determines how children develop a sense of right and wrong? What factors are the most formative? How do these interact with each other? While research has found that many things influence a child's moral development, the role of parenting continues to stand out as a significant factor. This is not only a result of hereditary traits passed from parent to child, but the pattern of interaction between the parent-child dyad. What are these important interactions that take place, and in what ways do they impact the work of the counselor?

Moral Development Theories

Many parents consider their child's moral development to be critical. Some aspects of morality that are valued within our society are concern and caring for others, issues regarding justice and fairness, trustworthiness and self-control. (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). Many theorists have attempted to explain how these develop, from psychoanalytic approaches (Freud) to cognitive (Piaget & Kohlberg) to more social-emotional (Hoffman). Each theory has its share of critics, but also valuable pieces that help develop the full picture.

Jean Piaget

Piaget was one of the first theorists who studied the moral thinking of young children. After much observation and conversations with children, he formed the belief that moral development takes place in several stages. Up until the age of about 5 he observed that toddlers and preschoolers are “premoral,” not concerned with established rules but making up their own, while often ignoring even those. From this age he noticed a shift, lasting until the age of 10 or 11 where children focus on following the rules and obedience to authority, but show little attention

to intention or possibilities. Piaget attributed this heteronomous stage to the child's cognitive structure, which makes it difficult for them to take in another person's perspective while maintaining their own. He also believed that natural authority structure and power differential between the parent and child contribute to this type of thinking. In early adolescence Piaget observed that children become more autonomous, with the ability to take in other perspectives through experiences with peer relationships, and adopting a more relativistic view of rules and laws. They were also much more likely to take an individual's intent into consideration before making a judgment. (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010) (Murrray, 2008)

Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg's research is of great significance in the realm of moral development. He expanded on Piaget's observations, proposing that children form their moral thinking in the areas of justice, rights, equality and human welfare as a result of their experiences. He studied moral development beyond the ages that Piaget did and found the process to be more lengthy and gradual than did Piaget. While Piaget focused on everyday challenges in the lives of the children he studied, Kohlberg's raised broader philosophical issues and hypothetical situations. He found three broad categories of moral thought: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional thinking. Most children were found to be in the preconventional stage with focus on obedience, rewards, and punishment. The majority of adults were in the conventional stage, but some remained preconventional, and a few moved on to more postconventional thinking. (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010; Murrray, 2008).

Domain Theory

In the 1970's the idea of domain theory emerged with research led by Elliot Turiel and his

colleagues. This addressed some of the limitations that the earlier cognitive theories had regarding moral development. Domain theory makes a distinction between the child's concept of morality and social conventions. Domain theorists found that moral thought relates to how one's actions affect the wellbeing of another person; specifically justice, welfare, and rights. Social conventions are seen as more arbitrary and are a way to coordinate social situations for smooth functioning. Personal rules include standards developed within a family or individual, but not addressed by any formal social rules.

Turiel does not see a single developmental path to moral development as Kohlberg did, but instead two separate but parallel pathways. This allows for greater differences among individuals in varying contexts, and seems to bring out more morally based decisions from younger people then would be expected from Kohlberg's approach. In fact, domain theorists have found that by the age of three, most children are able to distinguish between the different domains and judge them differently. (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010; Murrray, 2008).

Carol Gilligan

Carol Gilligan wrote a critique of Kohlberg's approach, arguing that it was biased against women, since only male subjects were studied. She proposed that women were more concerned with caring and responsibility than equality and justice as Kohlberg suggested. Gilligan sees these two moralities as being connected and yet distinct. Further research has found that they are not separated so much by gender lines, but that both men and women consider issues of both caring and justice in making moral decisions. (Murray, M.E. 2008)

The Conscience

The conscience is “a complex, multifaceted concept referring to the 'inner guiding system'

that regulates conduct without external control (Kochanska & Aksoan, 2006). Some researcher's describe the conscience as having two main parts: Moral emotions and moral conduct. (Kochanska, 1993). Others include a third component: moral cognition, or the ability to understand how violating standards may affect the self or another person. (Kochanska, Forman, Aksan, Dunbar, 2005). Conscience development is considered to be one of the most powerful factors preventing disruptive, callous, and antisocial conduct (Kochanska, Barry, Jimenez, Hollatz, & Woodard, 2009)

Moral Emotions

Moral emotions include feelings of guilt, empathy and remorse. Kochanska (1993), describes the guilt and remorse as "affective discomfort" that arises after committing or anticipating transgression. Certain temperaments are more prone to experience guilt than others, and parental discipline practices may also play a role in a child's experience of guilt. When compromised both guilt and effortful control correlate with and lead to antisocial outcomes, disruptive behavior disorders, and potentially psychopathy (Kochanska, et. al. 2009).

Feelings of empathy are also an important part of the developing conscience. Empathy is defined as "the cognitive awareness of another person's internal states, that is, his thoughts, feelings, perceptions and intentions..." (Kochanska, G. Aksan, N. Knaack, A. Rhines, H., 2004, pg. 29) Hoffman (2001) proposes that children began their development of empathy with a newborn's reactive cry and continue through five stages, ending up with "empathy for another's experience beyond the immediate situation" (pg. 6).

Moral Behaviors

The experience of moral emotions leads to moral behavior in many cases, although not in

all situations. Moral behavior is the child's ability to resist temptation, to exercise self-restraint, and to act in socially desirable ways. These behaviors are often referred to as “effortful control”. (Kochanska, 1993). For children that are high in guilt, differences in effortful control had no implications for disruptive conduct, however, for children with low guilt, differences in effortful control were significantly associated with disruptive conduct (Kochanska, et.al. 2009). While parenting clearly has an impact on moral behavior, there also appears to be a significant link between effortful control and temperament (Stifter, Cipriano, Conway, Kelleher, 2009)

Factors that influence the development of conscience

There are many characteristics that impact the development of conscience in a child. While both temperament and parenting style have proven to be influential, there are many other factors that are often overlooked. These include the child's culture, class, socioeconomic status, gender, biological and other parenting factors. (Grusec, Goodnow, Kuczynski, 2000).

Temperament

Kochanska (1993) found that children who are behaviorally inhibited are more likely to internalize rules and standards, while children who are high in exuberance are at risk for delayed internalization of rules and standards. Differences in fearfulness account for how much discomfort the child may experience after wrongdoing. Differences in impulsivity account for the child's behavioral control when they are expected to meet certain standards. Temperament may also effect the ways in which parents discipline their children and how children respond to parental correction.

Gender

Several studies have found that girls tend to score higher on measures of moral development

(Kochanska, et. al., 2005; Laible and Thompson, 2002**).** At age 3 girls scored consistently higher than boys on behavioral internalization. They also appeared to have more pro-social representations of relationships and better narrative skills. (Laible & Thompson, 2002)

Parental Practices that Promote Moral Development

Most parents want what is best for their children and hope that their children develop a good moral conscience. Unfortunately, sometimes they do not practice parenting in ways that promote conscience development. This may be a result of personality, attachment history, lack of information, cultural expectations, or mental health issues. The research is clear, however, that while there are many things that influence a child's moral development, parental factors are especially significant.

Attachment, Responsiveness, & Warmth

Studies have shown that attachment security plays a role in the development of conscience. A child who is securely attached to his or her primary caregiver is better able to process parental messages in regards to values or norms without being distracted by apprehension or anxious arousal. Attachment security also promote the child's orientation and attention toward the parent, which causes the child to have a happier mood toward the parent, and leads to more willing compliance. (Kocchanska, Aksan, Knaack, Rhines, 2004)

Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski (2000), state that “early mutually responsive parent-child interactions are predictive of a later moral orientation” (pg.207) This and other studies have found that when a mother is responsive to her child during the first two years, the child develops a 'responsive stance' toward the mother, and this in turn leads the child to accept, embrace, and even internalize the mother's values and standards. This is the formation of conscience at work. It

is also a significant protective factor against conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, and other psychopathology later in life. (Kochanska, et.al., 2004) (Kochanska, Forman. Aksan, Dunbar, 2005)

According to Kochanska, Aksan, Prisco, and Adams (2008) these children who had a highly mutually responsive orientation (MRO) with their mothers during the first two years were better able to regulate themselves and act with committed compliance at 52 months. Early MRO led mothers to rely less on power assertion, leading to better internalization and self-regulation.

One study found that the children with an MRO had more positive and enjoyable interactions with their mother. This fostered a positive attitude toward the mother, which in turn led the child to embrace the mother's rules and values and increased the children's moral conduct and cognition (Kochanska, et. al. 2005)

Use of Induction

In Martin Hoffman's (2001) extensive research on moral development, he discovered that young children are most likely to internalize parental standards if they have mild emotional arousal. This combined with parental induction, or reasoning, leads children to follow parental demands even when not being observed. Hoffman (2001) explains that induction involves the use of explanations or reasoning with a child in order to convey parental standards. It also involves a request for the child to act accordingly, and emphasizes consequences for the child's behavior (both for the child and the other). Parents who use induction tend to expect that a child make amends for misbehavior. When strong power assertion, or love withdrawal techniques are used, children may become anxious or angry. In these cases, the child often becomes self-oriented with aversive emotional reactions, rather than other-oriented with a display of empathy or sympathy. (Smetana, 1999)

Induction is considered the “single most powerful parental influence on children's moral development” (Berkowitz, & Grych, 1998). When the parent explains their own behavior and the implications of the child's behavior, the child learns greater empathy and altruism, while attaining higher levels of moral reasoning. Perhaps this is so powerful because it engages the child's understanding of the reasons for choosing a particular behavior, while at the same time showing them the impact of their behavior on someone else. Especially effective, is when the mother couples the use of induction regarding rules or moral issues, with discussion of emotion (Laible and Thompson, 2002).

When the parent speaks with a child about behavior it is also important that their messages be just slightly above the child's level of reasoning, but not by much. It is also important for parents to pay attention to the domain in which they are working with children. Authoritarian parents are likely to moralize issues that are social or personal in nature, while permissive parents may have extremely broad boundaries that leave even moral issues up to the child's discretion. A more appropriate style of parenting draws clear boundaries between the moral, the social-conventional, and personal. Negotiation may be permitted, but without the realm of the personal and conventional. (Smetana, 1999).

Positive Gentle Guidance

One of parent's greatest concerns about their children is compliance. And in fact, a child's degree of committed compliance rather than noncompliance or situational compliance consistently predicts their moral development (Kuchinksa, et. al., 2005). When mothers gently direct their children's behavior in ways that are not using power assertion, both toddlers and preschoolers are more likely to engage in committed compliance. The parent's use of positive

gentle guidance actually predicts the young child's early conscience development, prosocial behavior, feelings of guilt after wrongdoing, and more advanced moral reasoning. It is especially helpful for the parent to gently involve the child in the task. (Bandon & Volling, 2008). On the other hand, the mother's use of power assertion and punitive control is inversely related to children's moral reasoning and it is positively linked to their noncompliance and defiance (Volling, Mahoney, Rauer, 2009)

Berokowit, & Grych, (1998) suggest that parents help to develop a child's self-control capacity through using scaffolding or guided self-regulation where the parents provide the support for the child through guidance and feedback. Parents may began to do this by providing the external controls that the child needs before they are able to self-regulate, or by setting up situations that make them more controllable. “The problem of regulation involves safeguarding the infant from stimulation that is too strong and which will therefore have too great an arousing effect. Caregivers have a vital role in protecting and soothing.” (pg. 248).

Parental attitude and relationship

The entire family system has a role to play in a child's conscience development. Volling, Mahoney, and Rauer (2009) found strong evidence that when parents believe in the sanctification of their parenting role, there is positive association with their children's conscience development. If the parent had high levels of sanctification and used used positive socialization strategies, this predicted the child's affective discomfort or feelings of guilt after wrongdoing. They also found that children were more likely to internalize if both parents were using the same message.

Parents working together to co-parent their children also leads to positive conscience development (Spinrad, Eisenberg, Bernt, 2007), and is associated with higher scores of affective

discomfort and moral regulation in the child. It is important to note, however, that coparenting is also impacted by the child's behavior (Groenedyk, & Volling, 2007).

Children pay close attention to the important people around them, and they notice how people treat one another. The parent's interactions with one another and those inside and outside of the family, have a powerful influence. The parent's moral behavior, as well as their ability to talk about choices and emotions with their children will certainly impact the child's ability to both reason and act in moral ways, as well as internalize the parent's message. (Berkowitz & Grych, (1998). As Lickona (1983) puts it,

> "One of the surest ways to help our children turn their moral reasoning into positive moral behavior is to teach by example. Teaching kids respect by respecting them is certainly one way to teach by example... But teaching by example goes beyond how we treat our children. It has to do with how we treat and talk about others outside the family -- relatives, friends, strangers. It has to do with how we lead our lives" (pg. 20).

Interventions

Most counselors have many opportunities to work with families, including children. Although a thorough understanding of a child's moral development is clearly necessary when working with children, it is also invaluable when working with parents. Psychoeducation may be done as a part of individual or family sessions, as well as during parent groups to help parents understand what is appropriate or expected developmental behavior. The therapist may use this information to help parents work more effectively with their child and to normalize what they are experiencing. Many parents are concerned about their children's moral behavior, but have incorrect ideas about how to foster and encourage this development. When parent expectations are more realistic, and

children's needs recognized, the parent-child relationship begins to improve.

Parent-Child Interactive Therapy

One form of therapy called “Parent-Child Interactive Therapy” created by Sheila M. Eyberg, has trained therapists to work with both parents and their behaviorally or conduct disordered children. The model is based on both attachment and social-learning theories, with the understanding that authoritative parenting (high in nurturance and in demandingness) is best for children. The therapy takes place in two phases: Child-Directed Interaction (CDI) where the parent plays with the child following their lead, and Parent-Directed Interaction (PDI) where the parent is using behavior modification skills to set limits on the child's behavior. These experiences are both done with a therapist watching from another room and coaching the parent through the interaction with a small headset. As the parent becomes more positively engaged with the child, while learning to set firm limits, the relationship and the child's behavior begin to improve (Zisser, & Eyberg, 2010).

The Circle of Security ®

Another emerging and unique intervention that works with high risk children and caregivers to improve children's development, is called The Circle of Security ®. This program is based on attachment theory, object relations, and family systems theory, and integrates child development research in order to strengthen parent's caregiving skills and in turn improve the child's attachment to their caregiver.

In this model, caregivers are encouraged to increase sensitivity and responsiveness to their child's signals; increase their ability to reflect on behaviors and interactions between themselves and their child; and reflect on their own attachment histories and the impact they

have on their current relationship with their child (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell,2002) (Hoffman, Marvin, Cooper, Powell, 2006).

This is done with small groups of caregivers (5-6) who meet with a psychotherapist that provides a safe place for the parents to learn and share their struggles. In order to individualize the therapy each child undergoes the strange situation or strange situation for preschoolers and is classified into a particular attachment style. Parents are also videotaped interacting with their children on several occasions. The first few meetings in the group focus on psychoeducation in regards to attachment theory using The Circle of Security ® diagram (*Figure 1)*. Then each parent is given the opportunity to view several video-vignettes of himself or herself with the child. The group, along with the therapist, helps the caregiver explore their interaction with the child and helps him or her improve the capacity to read and respond to the child's cues and miscues. There is also time provided to discuss how the caregiver's own developmental history may influence their current caregiving. The last several weeks of group are focused on developing the ability to see the child's needs with greater empathy and to celebrate the parent or caregiver's increased sensitivity. (Marvin, R.et.al..,2002) (Hoffman, et.al, 2006)

The studies have shown this approach to be quite successful in changing a child's attachment style from disorganized to organized and from insecure to secure. The improvement in attachment style has significant implications for the child's overall moral development (Marvin, R.et.al..,2002) (Hoffman, et.al, 2006).

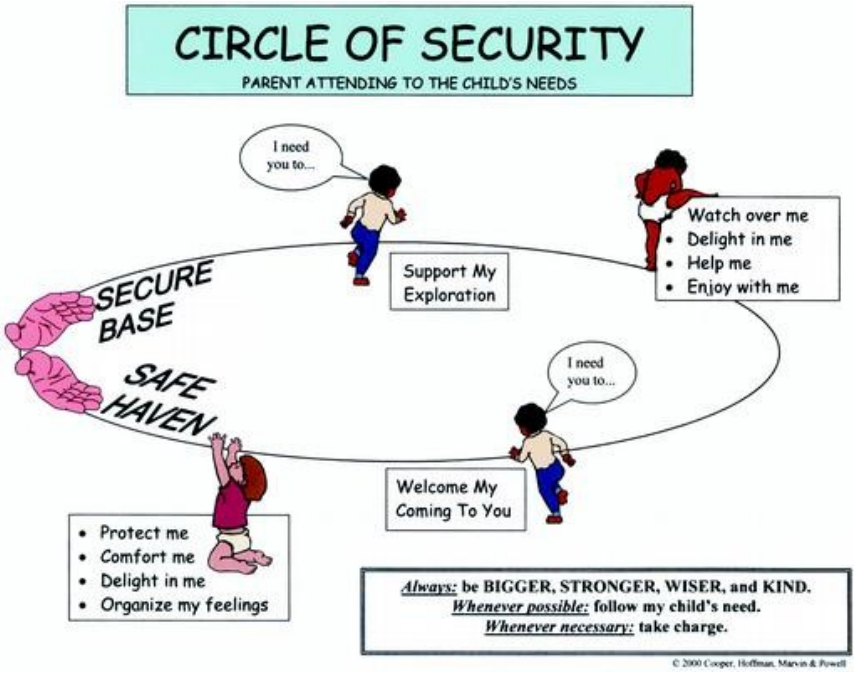

Figure 1: Circle of Security ® handout given to caregivers.

Conclusion

While researchers have been studying moral development for many years, there are still many questions left unanswered. The interactions between personality, parenting, and other factors is quite complex and will require more studies in order to be more fully understood. In spite of this, it is clear that parents do play a role in their children's moral development, and helping parents to understand how to promote this can make a significant difference in families. The focus on the attachment relationship and parental responsiveness appears to be foundational, with an emphasis on the use of induction and gentle guidance as the child enters the second and third years of life.

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