

Understanding Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development and Why It's Important for Teachers to Know

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As a teacher, you often witness your students struggling with the question of right or wrong each day in your classroom. How can I teach that student that it is important to share? Why did that other student share without being asked? Why is it that some children follow classroom rules when no one is watching, while others struggle to abide by classroom rules at all times? While some of the behaviors you witness may be due to a child's personality and upbringing, you may also be noticing patterns of behavior aligned with their moral development.

What you may have also come to understand in your work as a classroom teacher is that children at varying ages have different levels of moral reasoning: a young child is more likely to snatch a toy out of another child's hand, while a much older child will likely not exhibit those same behaviors. Understanding how moral reasoning evolves and develops through a child's life can inform how you approach classroom management, lesson design, and your students' social-emotional development.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

In 1958, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg published his Theory of Moral Development to explain how humans progress through distinct levels of moral thinking. While his theory has been refined over the years, with additional factors acknowledged and incorporated into a more comprehensive understanding of moral development, Kohlberg, as the pioneer of these ideas, remains worth studying. His work is a simple way to help us reflect on our students' moral development at various stages of their lives.

Kohlberg organized moral development into three levels, each with two stages. You'll now explore each level and stage of Moral Development described by Kohlberg, which helps you understand how and why people make certain moral decisions throughout their lives.

Level One: Preconventional Morality (Early Childhood Through Age 8-9)

If you teach early childhood or elementary grades, most of your students are operating at this first level of moral development. At this stage, children make moral decisions based on external consequences rather than internal principles.

Stage 1: Obedience and Punishment Orientation

In this earliest stage, children's moral compass points directly toward avoiding punishment. A four-year-old doesn't share the blocks in the classroom center because it's the right thing to do, but because he doesn't want to get into trouble. Children at this stage follow rules simply to avoid negative consequences.

Stage 2: Self-Interest Orientation

As children progress into Stage 2, their moral reasoning becomes more sophisticated but remains self-centered. Now, instead of just avoiding punishment, they're motivated by what they can gain. A 7-year-old will likely be organizing the books in her reading center, not because she values order, but because she knows it will gain praise from her teacher for cleaning up without being asked. In other words, she views good behavior as something that leads to a positive outcome for herself.

What This Means for Your Classroom

Understanding that your young students think this way should inform how you structure lessons and manage behavior. Since these children are naturally focused on fairness and self-interest, you can consider how you might link your academic content to these concepts to help promote and develop their moral code. When teaching division, you might frame word problems as how to share items equally among friends. Or, in a reading class, you might choose some books that feature moral dilemmas a child has to solve.

Level Two: Conventional Morality (Early Adolescence to Adulthood)

Most middle and high school teachers work primarily with students at this second level of moral development. At this level, young people begin to recognize and accept societal norms and values. Their moral decisions shift from self-interest to consideration of how their actions affect their personal relationships and their community.

Stage 3: Good Interpersonal Relationships

Young adolescents at Stage 3 are very concerned with how others view them. They will be more likely to conform to rules not because of external rewards or punishments, but because they want to be seen as "good" people. They also seek approval from others and make moral decisions to maintain positive relationships. A middle school student might choose not to cheat on a test because he doesn't want his peers to think poorly of him, rather than because of fear of punishment or because it's the right thing to do. At this stage, an individual's behavior is strongly influenced by their desire to be liked and accepted.

Stage 4: Maintaining Social Order

As students grow older and move into Stage 4, typically in later adolescence and even early adulthood, their moral reasoning expands beyond personal relationships to encompass their community or society as a whole. It's at this stage that they really begin to understand and acknowledge the role of authority figures, and recognize that society has both written and unwritten rules. They also understand that in different situations, behavioral expectations can vary.

What This Means for Your Classroom

Students at conventional morality will benefit greatly from opportunities to engage in thoughtful discourse. Encourage writing assignments, class discussions, and debates that explore the importance of relationships and social order. Rather than imposing all classroom rules yourself, involve students in setting classroom norms to help tap into their developing sense of collective responsibility. You can also pose real-world problems and have students collaborate to find solutions. Have them debate controversial issues, carefully facilitating discussions where multiple perspectives are heard and respected. Finally, consider service learning projects that connect classroom learning to community impact, such as fundraising for a cause, publishing informational brochures about local issues, or collecting donations for a homeless shelter.

Level Three: Postconventional Morality (Some Adults)

Kohlberg believed that fewer than 15% of adults reach the highest level of moral reasoning, in which individuals develop their own moral code based on universal

principles. Even though fewer people above school age reach this level, it's still worth understanding what postconventional morality looks like.

At Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights

At this stage, people move beyond traditional laws to think about differences in individual beliefs. They realize that not every rule is black and white, and they begin to question whether laws are always just.

Stage 6: Universal Principles

Finally, at the highest level, individuals develop their own ethical code based on principles such as justice, equality, and respect for human life. They may even be willing to face negative consequences for following their personal beliefs.

What This Means for Your Classroom

High school teachers can help students begin their transition into adulthood by exposing them to gray areas in moral reasoning. When studying historical events like Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, ask students to grapple with complex questions: Was she justified in breaking the law? Can a law be unjust? This stretches their thinking and plants seeds for more sophisticated moral reasoning, even if most students aren't quite ready to fully operate at this level yet.

Try This:

The next time a student makes a choice in your classroom, pause and ask yourself: What stage of moral reasoning might be driving this decision?

Pay attention to the language students use when explaining their choices. Do they talk about avoiding punishment? Getting rewards? Being liked by peers? Or maybe following rules for the greater good? Their words will reveal where they are in their moral development and how you might frame a conversation to support their own moral development.

Once you identify patterns, adjust your approach to student discipline and classroom management accordingly. For students at preconventional morality, you might want to be sure to emphasize fairness and concrete consequences. For those at conventional morality, plan to create more opportunities for discussion about relationships and community impact. This simple observation practice can open up new insights into your students and new possibilities for how you teach them!

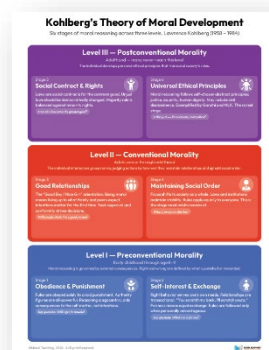
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Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development Infographic.

Download this infographic to explore Kohlberg's three levels of moral development, from childhood reasoning driven by punishment and self-interest, through conformity to social norms in adolescence, to the rare adult stage guided by universal principles like justice and human dignity.