



Handle with Care

To deal with everyday ethical problems, kids need more than just a simple list of rules or virtues, argues Nel Noddings. They need chances to talk through their problems with caring and engaged adults.

A YEAR OR SO AGO, I VISITED AN excellent independent school to do some work with its faculty and parents. Although the school has a beautiful campus, enviable resources, high test scores, and a dedicated faculty, it was experiencing some problems with bullying. (Bullying is a widespread problem at every level of schooling and socio-economic class; see “The Bully Problem,” *Greater Good*, Fall/Winter, 2005-06.) While I was there, teachers asked me to talk to fourth graders about the problem. I said that I would do so provided faculty understood that I would not preach, scold,

or threaten. It was agreed that I would engage the kids in conversation about bullying, an important ethical issue—one that affects their lives every day.

I entered the roomful of 60 or 70 fourth graders with some nervousness. Suppose I asked a question and no one responded? I need not have worried. I told them I had been informed about the bullying problem and asked, “Could *you* ever be a bully?” Hands shot up all over the room.

In the ensuing dialogue, it became clear that kids are not only afraid of becoming victims of bullying; they are also afraid

of becoming perpetrators. Indeed, they described incidents (without names or details) in which they had joined in bullying because their “friends were doing it.” Ashamed and uncomfortable, they sometimes stood by and watched silently. At other times, they had actually joined the bullies. Rarely, if ever, did they step in and say, “Hey, this is wrong.” They considered telling a teacher but decided against doing so, because there is a powerful peer rule against tattling or snitching.

It was not only a confusion of loyalties that led them to join the bullies. The

students confessed that when they were unhappy or worried they sometimes took it out on others. Anger at parents, teachers, or siblings could lead to picking on someone else more vulnerable and, quite often, suffering at the hands of a bully led a student to act like one. The kids agreed that they did not like being thought of as weak or unpopular.

As the conversation continued, it struck me that we adults rarely engage kids in genuine dialogue. We talk at them, but we less often listen and talk *with* them. These kids were telling me (and their teachers who were present) that they wanted to be good but were finding it hard. Their honesty and anxiety reminded me of a comment that George Orwell had made about his own early school days—that he was living in a world where it was “not possible” for him to be good.

Most children and adolescents, like Orwell as a boy, want to be good, but they find it very difficult. There are many competing pressures on them, and they often feel that they must choose between loyalty to friends and “doing what is right,” as dictated by parents and teachers. Children need opportunities to talk with sympathetic adults who can help them to understand that they are not alone in their ethical confusion and that they are not the only ones who sometimes fall short of their own ethical ideal.

When we tell kids that bullying is wrong and that they should report such incidents, we are, first, telling them something they already know and, second, advising them to do something they cannot do in good faith. Instead of preaching and commanding, we should listen to what they are going through. It can sometimes be useful for victims of bullying to tell their stories to the whole class. It takes courage for a victim to do this, and the courage should be acknowledged. It also takes careful preparation by the teacher. In an atmosphere of care and trust, most students will respond to the victim’s story with empathy. Regular dialogue on such events may give other students the courage to intervene at the start of a bullying situation. It may help to ask students what they might say to stop the bullying before it really gets going. Besides “Hey, this is wrong,” kids in that class also suggested, “We don’t do that here, remember?” or “Leave him alone, ok?” as well as “Come on, let’s play ball,” or some other plea for an alternative activity. Making sure to include kids who are often left out of group activities was also

mentioned. Loners are frequently victims of bullies, and in extreme situations, these victims sometimes turn to violence as a way of seeking justice.

It is clear from this conversation and many others that in order to make ethical decisions, young people need help in achieving self-understanding, and that genuine dialogue with caring adults is one way to promote such understanding. A climate of care and trust is developed through dialogue, and that climate then supports deeper, more open dialogue.

**We adults
rarely engage
kids in genuine
dialogue.
We talk at
them, but we
less often listen
and talk *with*
them.**

Caring and moral education

Dialogue is a central feature of care theory—a powerful approach to moral (ethical) education. The emphasis in care theory is on caring relations, not so much on the virtue of the moral agent. There are two parties in a caring relation: the one who cares (the carer) and the one who receives care (the cared-for). These are not, of course, permanent roles; in mutual relations, the two parties regularly exchange positions. In any caring encounter, the consciousness of the carer is characterized by receptive, non-selective attention (real listening) and motivational displacement; that is, the carer hears the expressed needs of the cared-for and is moved to respond to them.

Of course, carers cannot always respond positively to the needs expressed by the cared-for. Sometimes resources are not available, and sometimes the carer properly disapproves of the need expressed. However, even in such cases, the carer shows by her response—continued dialogue—that

she has heard that need, and she tries to reply in a way that maintains the caring relation.

But there are two parties in a caring relation, and the cared-for contributes significantly by acknowledging the carer’s efforts to care. This acknowledgment may be made, for example, in words, a smile, a bodily relaxation of tension, or a renewed pursuit of the goal initially expressed as a need. Thoughtful teachers, physicians, nurses, and parents are all aware that students, patients, and children make an essential contribution to caring relations. The response need not be one of gratitude, but their signs of acknowledgment serve to complete the relation—to show that the caring has been received.

Care theory recognizes the contribution of the cared-for by insisting that a relation cannot properly be labeled “caring” unless the care is received by the cared-for. In this insistence, the caring described in care theory differs from that in virtue theory. The latter defines caring in terms of a carer’s virtue—her conscientious intention to act in the best interest of the cared-for. Many well-meaning parents and teachers qualify as “virtue carers,” but those for whom they care sometimes deny the caring. In many of our secondary schools, there is a widespread complaint of “Nobody cares!” Yet when we talk with teachers in these schools, we find that most of them are working hard in what they regard as the best interest of their students. What is missing is the open, listening attitude of true dialogue, the dialogue essential to caring relations. Such dialogue is often missing in our treatment of bullying.

An ethic of care suggests four basic elements in moral education. First, caring teachers model caring. They do not pretend to care in order to model caring; rather, their actual caring shows students what it means to care.

Second, caring teachers engage in dialogue with their students. They rarely preach, scold, threaten, or punish. Their dialogue is open and respectful; it includes listening as well as talking, and it treats real problems—problems that have been identified in cooperation with their students. When appropriate, caring teachers share their own moral dilemmas and mistakes. They acknowledge ambiguity and help students in the difficult task of learning how to live with unavoidable ambiguity. We saw earlier, through my visit to that fourth grade class, how powerful dialogue can be in understanding and controlling bullying.

Dialogue on moral questions should permeate the curriculum; it should not be confined to one subject or course of study.

Dialogue can also be powerful in resolving other everyday classroom problems. Years ago, when I was teaching high school math, the school faculty periodically complained about student tardiness to class and, after one such discussion, decided—presumably, in the best interests of the kids—to clamp down and assess real penalties for lateness. I was uncomfortable with this and decided to talk with my students about the problem. I learned that the fault lay primarily with teachers—particularly gym teachers—who kept their students busy until the last minute and then insisted that they take showers. The kids had to run, wet, to their next class. It did not seem right to penalize the kids for the resulting lateness. I suggested that we leave the row of desks nearest the door for latecomers and that students who were unavoidably late should take those seats quietly. I never reported any tardiness. The kids knew I respected them, and they returned the respect.

Dialogue is, by its very nature, a two-way process; through it, both students and teachers learn how to handle everyday ethical problems better. By establishing tough rules against tardiness, the faculty had made lateness an ethical (rule-bound) issue. By accepting unavoidable lateness with respect, I resolved an ethical issue of my own—treating students fairly despite an unfair rule.

Third, caring teachers give their students opportunities to practice caring for others. When working in small groups, students are expected to help, not defeat and surpass, one another. When students listen to the experience of bullying victims, for instance, they are invited to help—to exercise the empathic attention characteristic of caring.

Fourth, carers practice confirmation; that is, they attribute to the cared-for the best possible motive consonant with reality. In talking with a child who has been guilty of bullying or complicity in bullying, we might begin by saying, “I know you were scared,” or “I know you were angry,” or “I know you didn’t know what to do.” Such acknowledgment does not excuse the bullying, and we must make this clear. But confirmation—perhaps the loveliest of moral acts—points the culprit to a better self, one already half-present and struggling to become a consistent reality. It acknowledges that young people want to preserve their moral identity; they do not want to become bad people.

To confirm another, however, we have to know that other. We do not use confirming statements as a strategy; that would be both hypocritical and harmful. We must see the actual possibilities within them and understand their real confusion. Recognizing this reminds us that time spent on building relations of care and trust in the classroom is not wasted time. Teachers and students need that time to get to know one another. Relations of care and trust provide the foundation for both academic and moral education.

Contrasting approaches

The caring approach, with its emphasis on dialogue and relation, is what might be called a “whole school” approach. A whole school approach involves all teachers and all subjects in the task of ethical education. It is especially suited for moral education in middle and high schools. Whereas elementary schools often add a special program or course on moral education, secondary schools—already overloaded with required academic courses—can rarely do this. In any case, there is some doubt about whether adding a special course is the best decision at any level. The effect of placing responsibility for moral education on one course or instructor might well be that other teachers will no longer see themselves as moral educators. Instead, they may believe that the subject is being handled by a special-

ist in a course designed for exactly that purpose.

There are some attractive materials for use at the elementary school level. Some literature-based programs present a set of virtues—for example, honesty, loyalty, courage, perseverance—in stories chosen for both illustrative and literary quality. Some of these programs concentrate on heroes; others depict people exercising virtues in everyday life. Although the stories are often attractive and appealing, the attempt to teach virtues directly is highly questionable. Socrates doubted we could do this, and even today there is little evidence that such attempts are successful. However, if stories are followed by extensive dialogue—instead of preaching and demanding specific answers—they may well be effective. Dialogue is again the key.

Similarly, programs that concentrate on moral reasoning may be ineffective in producing moral behavior. One can reason at an impressively high level and still behave badly. The discussion induced by moral dilemmas or philosophical fictions must be extended to the kinds of problems kids actually face, and time must be devoted to listening empathically as well as thinking logically. Moreover, dialogue on moral questions should permeate the curriculum; it should not be confined to one subject or course of study.

There are no guarantees in teaching or parenting—only best bets. Dialogue can be highly effective, but it does not always produce desired changes in behavior. One teacher has told me the story of her dialogue with high school juniors about cheating. Many of her students freely admitted that they sometimes (even often) cheated.

Student 1: Everybody does it. There’s so much pressure for good grades, and I need a high GPA.

Student 2: But if you cheat, you won’t learn the stuff.

Student 1: You mean I’ll be sorry someday that I don’t really know the plot and characters of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*?
(Laughter from the class)

Student 3: Well, but it isn’t fair to those who don’t cheat...

Student 1: My father says, “Life isn’t fair.” You have to look out for yourself.

Teacher: But how does this make you feel?

Student 3: It makes me feel creepy...

Student 1: Well, in your case...
(Subdued laughter from the class)

Teacher (to Student 3): That's how I would feel, too. Very uncomfortable.

The teacher in this episode was trying to awaken the sense of moral identity revealed in our earlier story of fourth graders and bullying. But when one student acknowledged feeling “creepy,” Student 1 mocked him. The teacher knew that she would have to revisit the issue of cheating (moral dialogue is continuous), and she also realized that, in working with Student 1, there was no easy way to confirm him. She had not yet uncovered a positive motive for his unethical behavior. At best, she learned more about the complexity of the problem. She now believes that the whole faculty should work toward creating a culture that will reduce grade-grubbing and encourage genuine intellectual interest.

In endorsing a whole school approach with dialogue at its heart, I want to add one more word of caution. Sometimes educators decide that ethical behavior, like academic success, should be rewarded, and special awards are presented to students in recognition of exemplary behavior. I have mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, acts of moral virtue such as kindness should be recognized, but they should probably be recognized on the spot—“That was really nice of you”—when a child shares with or helps another. The likelihood of this happening increases when teacher and students spend enough time together to develop caring relations. On the other hand, awards presented at assemblies may encourage a form of competition in false virtue. And the quiet child who regularly does nice things because she really cares about her classmates may never be recognized. Further, we should worry that kids will decide to be good only for the sake of rewards.

Through a continuous moral dialogue and guided practice, we hope to show that the culture of care we build together is itself a reward—one that enriches both individual and community life.

Nel Noddings, Ph.D., is Lee Jacks Professor of Education Emerita at Stanford University. She has published 15 books and more than 200 articles and chapters. Her latest book is *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Always On

BY SCOTT SEIDER

Educators often refer to the “teachable moment”—that moment when a comment, incident, or question by one of our students presents an opportunity for deep learning to take place. When it comes to matters of ethics, it sometimes feels like every moment of the day qualifies, giving us teachers the chance (and the responsibility) to help students reflect on their behavior and refine their decision-making skills. Here are just a few examples I've encountered:

Walking down the hall on my way to my first period class, I overhear one student exclaim to his friend, “That's so gay!” A few steps later, I hear another student declare, “Is she retarded?”

During my study hall duty period, I spot one student copying another student's homework.

In the cafeteria, I notice a deserted lunch table on which three or four students have left behind trays, brown bags, empty sandwich bags, and food remnants. They know that a custodian will come by to clean up after them.

At the end of the day, a senior comes to me with one of her college applications. There is a question on the application about whether or not she has ever been suspended, and she asks me whether she really has to check “Yes” if she has only been suspended once—and an “in-house” suspension at that.

I would estimate that the typical school teacher encounters a dozen ethically charged teachable moments like these every day. Speaking for myself, it can sometimes be overwhelming to feel as if I am never “off duty”: so often these moments bubble up during my lunch break, on a mad dash to the photocopy room, or even on a trip to the bathroom. And, of course, each of the examples I offer above is somewhat complicated. They are by and large not simple rule violations, such as when one student calls another a derogatory name; in that situation, I might simply remind the offending student of the school policy against “shame, blame, or attack.”

Instead, consider the first example: the student who exclaims, “That's so gay!” When I stop to address this comment, which I consider to be inappropriate, the offending student will explain to me in an earnest (or even pitying) tone that of course he or she is not intending to insult gay people, but rather that this is just an expression—a figure of speech. Helping this student to understand my concerns with such homophobic language requires a conversation about the following. First, his or her intent in making such a comment is not all that matters. Second, a comment that equates “gay” with “bad” makes our community a hostile and even dangerous one for gay students and faculty members. And third, both of these problems are true even if there is not a gay person around to overhear the comment.

Such a conversation—one that may actually prove effective in changing the offending student's behavior—can be a difficult one to take on during the four minutes in between classes or the 26 minutes allotted for lunch. And yet taking on these conversations does feel like part of my job—part of what I signed up for.

Partly because of these conversations, especially at the high school level, I am sometimes astonished by how much better I seem to know my students than do my students' parents.

“Your daughter has a wonderful sense of humor,” I once told a mother and father on Open House night. The two parents stared back at me in astonishment.

“Really?” said the mother.

“She doesn't talk to us,” the father admitted sheepishly. I reassured them that they were by no means alone in receiving the silent treatment from their teenager. Of course, conversations like these leave me all the more convinced of my responsibility to take on ethically charged teachable moments with my students. For better or worse, I may be the only adult they really talk to all day.

Scott Seider is a teacher and administrator at Fenway High School in Boston, Massachusetts, and a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.