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Editors

Morality, Ethics, and Gifted Minds

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Chapter 16

Morality, Ethics and Good Work: Young People's Respectful and Ethical Minds*

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Abstract We contend that the formation of the contemporary mind should emphasize the development of respect and ethics. Individuals with respectful minds welcome differences between themselves and other individuals and groups and seek to work effectively with all parties. Individuals who possess ethical minds acknowledge their membership within numerous local, national, and international communities; they consider the effects of their actions upon these communities. The multiple intelligences of human beings – particularly logical–mathematical intelligence and the personal intelligences – are the core capacities upon which policymakers and practitioners must call when seeking to foster young people's respectful and ethical minds. Here, we offer a number of experiences that can enhance relevant facets of young people's logical–mathematical and personal intelligences and help them to employ their intelligences in prosocial ways.

Keywords Booster shots · Crystallizing experiences · Ethical mind · Good work project · Good work toolkit · Horizontal supports · Internal supports · Logical–mathematical intelligences · Multiple intelligences theory · Personal intelligences · Respectful mind · Vertical supports · Wake up calls

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It is difficult to turn on the news or open a newspaper in twenty-first century America without learning of yet another high-profile ethical lapse. The millennium began with the demise of Enron, Arthur Andersen and WorldCom in some of the largest cases of corporate fraud in our nation's history. Since that inauspicious beginning, dozens of our nation's top athletes have been caught using illegal drugs to gain a competitive advantage in sports such as baseball, cycling, and track; leading academics and intellectuals have published books with passages plagiarized from other sources; and congressmen, senators, and cabinet members have been implicated in a bribery scandal involving illegal lobbying and campaign contributions. In *The Cheating Culture*, David Callahan (2004) described these and more mundane examples of unethical behavior as having become routine over the past 2 decades. Likewise, interviews with hundreds of young professionals by our colleagues at the Good Work Project have revealed that, as they enter the real world, many young adults believe the competition to get ahead *necessitates* such ethical compromises (Fischman et al. 2004). Scholars have found a similar mindset to be prevalent amongst high achieving high school students as well (Howard 2007; Pope 2003).

This state of affairs leads to numerous questions and concerns from a variety of stakeholders. For scholars, such widespread ethical lapses raise questions about the nature of morality and ethics as well as questions about where our beliefs about these concepts originate. For policy-makers and practitioners, this "cheating culture" raises more pragmatic questions about the types of ethical frameworks that are desirable for the communities in which we live and what can be done to achieve and sustain such frameworks. In this chapter, we consider the questions of both sets of stakeholders. We begin by offering a scholarly perspective on the nature of morality and ethics and then utilize this perspective as a foundation for considering which ethical frameworks to privilege and how to go about instilling them in young people.

16.1 Conceptualizing Morality

One question posed by scholars concerns the nature of morality and ethics. A substantial line of scholarship conceives of morality as linked to a particular individual's intelligence. One of the founding fathers of intelligence testing, Lewis Terman, argued that children with high IQ's were not only more intelligent than their peers but possessed stronger moral characters as well (Terman 1925). Hollingworth (1942) added that individuals with IQ's over 180 demonstrated greater concern for ethical issues than their less gifted peers. Likewise, Lovecky (1992), Roeper (2003), and Silverman (1994) all have reported that intellectually gifted individuals describe deeper concerns for the needs and feelings of others than their less gifted peers. In seeking to explain these perceived links between intelligence and morality, Clark and Hankins (1985) reported that gifted individuals are more likely to read newspapers than less gifted individuals, and thus are more attuned to local and world events with ethical implications. Mendaglio (1995) added that gifted individuals demonstrate a superior ability to take the perspectives of others.

While the scholarship described above seeks to establish a link between intellectual giftedness and morality, another body of scholarship on morality in the “real world” calls this link into question. S. Oliner and P. Oliner (1988) compared the characteristics of German citizens who served as rescuers during the Holocaust to those who served as bystanders, and Colby and Damon (1992) examined the qualities and traits possessed by 23 adult moral exemplars. Both sets of scholars found that the moral exemplars in their respective studies did not demonstrate particularly strong moral reasoning skills. As Colby and Damon observed, “Pondering moral problems is not the same as dedicating one’s life to their solution... The will to take a stand may derive from a source entirely different from the ability to arrive at sophisticated intellectual judgment” (p. 6). In short, both the Oliners and Colby and Damon concluded that sophisticated moral reasoning skills do not necessarily correlate with prosocial behavior. Supporting this perspective is neuroscience research that has found some individuals who suffer brain damage in particular regions of their frontal lobes to lose their sense of right or wrong, despite maintaining normal results on IQ tests (Anderson et al. 1999). Such a finding underscores the claims made by the Oliners and Colby and Damon that morality is not simply a sub-set of intelligence.

16.2 Origins of Morality

A second question taken up by scholars concerns the origins of morality. The individual perhaps most responsible for turning the lens of developmental psychology to issues of morality was Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984). Following in the tradition of Piaget, Kohlberg (1981) developed a stage theory of moral development that asserted individuals could deepen their moral reasoning skills (and thereby their moral actions) through both experience and education. Kohlberg (1984) assessed the moral reasoning ability of individuals by gauging their reaction to a series of vignettes that described moral dilemmas. Believing that morality was a trait that could be nurtured and deepened, Kohlberg and his protégés also utilized these vignettes as an educational tool for promoting moral development.

While Kohlberg remains the founding father of contemporary morality research, a number of scholars in recent years have questioned whether individuals can meaningfully deepen their moral reasoning abilities in the manner suggested by Kohlberg. Greene (2001) has asserted that, “There is a growing consensus that moral judgments are based largely on intuition – ‘gut feelings’ about what is right or wrong in particular cases” (p. 847). As evidence of this claim, he pointed to fMRI studies in which people exposed to personal moral dilemmas demonstrated greater neural activity in regions of the brain that regulate emotion and social cognition. Haidt (2001) concurred that the moral reasoning process described by Kohlberg and Piaget has been overemphasized. Rather, Haidt argued that, “People have quick and automatic moral intuitions, and when called on to justify those intuitions they generate post hoc justifications out of a priori moral theories” (p. 823). Likewise,

