

The Ethical Young Child: Pipe Dream or Possibility?

by David Elkind

You can teach any child any subject at any age in an intellectually responsible way.

— Bruner, 1960

The idea that we can teach subjects like ethics, chemistry, and physics to preschoolers is attractive to both parents and early childhood educators. This is particularly true for ethics. Wouldn't it be lovely if young children could treat each other with respect, fairness, and empathy? It wouldn't be so bad, either, if these attitudes were kindly extended to us, their parents, and teachers. While the idea of teaching ethics, and the sciences, to young children is appealing, it is questionable whether this is possible in practice.

When we think of ethics, chemistry, or physics we think of a body of knowledge, or a science, which, over the years, has been systematically accumulated and refined. Young children can hardly be expected to learn this kind of knowledge. They have yet to attain the intellectual abilities, and the symbolic skills, required to understand abstract concepts. The attainment of these mental tools in adolescence will enable them to fully understand, say, Kant's moral imperative — always treat others as one would treat oneself. This level of intellectual ability is also required to learn, and understand, the periodic tables and the law of gravitation.

I should say, however, that it is easy to be misled in this regard. I have a physicist friend who did his graduate work at the University of Iowa. He used to amaze his professors by walking down halls of the physics department with his three-year-old daughter whom he had taught a bunch of physical formulas. In a loud voice he would ask her, "What is Newton's

law of gravitation?" To which she would reply, "f equals G times $\frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2}$ over r squared." Of course she was responding by rote and had no understanding of the law she was parroting. Still it was an impressive performance. With young children we have to be careful not to infer what they know from what they say. Preschoolers can say much more than they can understand.

There is a way, however, to give a certain truth to what Bruner wrote and this may be what he had in mind. It is possible to define a subject matter in a *broad* as well as in a *narrow sense*. From a broad, less rigorous perspective, one could argue that young children have a rudimentary ethical sense. They are quite astute in assessing those people who are genuinely kind and friendly and those who are not. In the same way, young children learn a great deal of elementary chemistry in everyday life. In making soup they learn that boiling water makes vegetables soft. Likewise, they learn a lot of elementary physics when they discover which objects float and which sink.

This understanding of ethics, chemistry, and physics is intuitive. It is understood at the practical level but without children's ability to put what they know into words. Nor can they test its truth. That is the problem with intuitive knowledge which is as likely to be wrong as it is to be right. For example, children may be abused by adults to whom they are attached and whom they trust. Likewise, children might assume, because boiling water softens vegetables, that it will also soften an egg. In the same way, children who know that light things float and heavy things sink still believe big things are more likely to sink than small things. Intuitive knowledge, though valuable, is often wrong and has to be corrected by systematic observation and experiment.

Given these considerations what true ethical ideas can we teach young children? At this stage of development children learn much more by example than they do by direct instruction. There are three types of adult behaviors that can help children gain an intuitive sense of ethics. These are: the use of good manners, fairness, and sharing of authority.



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These Days.

Good manners

One of the most powerful ways in which we can teach intuitive ethics to children is to be courteous to them. *Children are most like us in their feelings and least like us in their thoughts.* When appropriate, it is important to say “please” and “thank you” to young children. It is particularly important to say, “I’m sorry” when we lose our temper or have to break a promise. When we use good manners with young children, we show respect for them and their feelings. This helps instill a sense of self respect which is the basis for respecting others.

My granddaughter Lily gave me a good example of the reciprocity of good manners. During the morning she spent some time using crayons to draw pictures on a pad on the kitchen table. We were getting ready for breakfast and I asked her if she would help me put the crayons away. We took turns putting them in the box. When we were finished I said, “Thank you, Lily, you are a good helper.” Later when I poured her juice, she said, “Thank you, Poppa.”

Fairness

Making an effort to be fair with young children is another way in which we can help implant an intuitive sense of ethics in our young charges. If two children are squabbling, it is important not to prejudge the situation. The relevant thing is to give each child a chance to tell his or her story without interference from the other. Once the stories are told, one might say, “That is very interesting, now why don’t we move on to another activity.” In this way we hear both sides but don’t play favorites. Usually, giving children a chance to tell their stories diffuses the situation enough so that they are willing to be distracted and forget the altercation. Treating conflict in this way gives preschoolers the intuition that confrontations can be resolved without mushrooming into a battle royal.

I often witness teachers showing fairness at our Children’s School at Tufts. One morning while I was observing, a child asked to join two others who were building in the block corner. They said, “No,” he could not join them. The teacher who witnessed the episode sat down on the floor next to the rejected boy and helped him build a tower of his own. When the other boys noticed what the teacher

was doing they had second thoughts and invited the other child to join them. Without saying anything, the teacher by being fair, made the other the boys aware that they had been unfair.

Sharing authority

A third way of contributing to the young children’s intuitive sense of ethics is through sharing authority. Young children are small and inexperienced and we often have to exercise unilateral authority: “Don’t touch that; it is hot,” or “Don’t eat that; it will make you sick.”

Whenever it is possible, however, we need to involve children in real life activities that have meaning and purpose. In this way we teach mutual or shared respect, crucial to ethical understanding. Giving children age appropriate chores at home, or at the child care facility, is one way of giving children the sense of participating as equals. Montessori understood this when she outfitted her Children’s House in Rome with child-sized furniture, utensils, cutlery, and china.

I often share authority with Lily. When we were preparing breakfast we found that we were out of bagels. I went down to the cellar to the freezer where we had some frozen ones and Lily asked to join me. When I took the bag of bagels out of the freezer, I asked Lily to hold them while I closed the door. She seemed able to carry them comfortably so I asked her if she would like to carry them up to the kitchen. She did, and was very pleased with herself for doing so. I could tell she had a sense of being involved and helpful.

Accordingly, while we cannot teach ethics to young children in the narrow sense of a set of abstract principles, we can teach it to them in the broad sense of intuitive knowledge. We can do this when we use good manners, are fair, and share our authority with our preschoolers. In this way we help them gain an intuitive understanding of respect, justice, and citizenship. It is from our actions, not our words, that young children gain their first understanding of ethics.

Reference

Bruner, J. (1960). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Good Question! Elkind poses the question, “What true ethical ideas can we teach young children?” Explore this question with teachers to uncover their thinking about teaching children ethical behavior.

Start with 3: Good manners, fairness, and sharing authority are the three types of adult behaviors that can help children gain an intuitive sense of ethics. Brainstorm ways to support children in developing their ethical intuition.