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Morality Education for Adolescents

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Abstract

Since the time of Socrates, each generation has expressed concern over the moral character of its young people. Long standing debates have been held over the responsibility of teaching children morality, and whether or not school curriculum should include character and morality topics. A short history of moral education is explored in this review. Furthermore, some advantages for including morality in public schools, and suggested methods for doing so, are also discussed.

Morality Education for Adolescents

Theodore Roosevelt once said (Ellenwood, 2006), “to education one in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” Parents and educators both find challenges in attempting to instill moral values in young people. This is not a new issue to be faced. The following quote dates back to the time of Socrates (Ellenwood, 2006), “Our youth now love luxury, they have bad manners, contempt for authority, show disrespect for their parents, and love to chatter instead of work.” Adolescence is a time of questioning for most young people. Accompanying the many physical and emotional changes taking place during this time, are a definite focus on oneself and a general lack of respect for others. It is no surprise this Socratic quote has held true for many generations.

This review will begin by looking at a brief history of moral education and the two philosophies driving morality education in public schools. Information showing the importance of including morality in school curriculum is then presented, along with methods for doing so.

Moral education in public schools in the United States, has fallen under two general approaches. The first, referred to as value-neutral tradition, basically states schools cannot teach values. This implies values are an individual choice and are completely separate from formal education. The second approach, school as inculcator of basic values, supports the inclusion of moral education within schools (Ellenwood, 2006).

In taking either of the two approaches to the extreme, positive results for our young people will not be found. Countless examples can be studied where these situations did occur. As with most things, the best approach is usually found by reaching a compromise between the two. Logically, it is important state; dependence on only the educational structure to instill values is not the solution either.

Invariably, when a young teenager commits a violent crime, society always asks “Where were the parents?” The underlying meaning behind this statement suggests good parents raise good kids who know better. Good parents teach their children, violence is not an acceptable way to solve problems (Carter, 2001). Society assumes everyone knows violence is wrong, especially murder. But, how do children get to that point? Who is responsible for the moral teaching of children?

It seems apparent; family plays a major role in developing a child’s sense of morality. However, families do not live in isolation. They are the basic unit of the larger culture or society. Society has its own, often competing, message to convey (Carter, 2001). When society’s message doesn’t agree with what is being taught at home, confusion can lead to trouble.

As Carter (2001) states,

Morality, it was said, was taught to children by the cooperation of three institutions: the family, the school and the place of worship. If each of the three reinforced the moral teaching of the other two, young people would receive a consistent message, and that yearning for moral content would be fulfilled. (p. 1)

Unfortunately, the society in which many adolescents find themselves, have these three character building institutions at odds with each other (Carter, 2001). It is not uncommon for most families to find instances where society is marketing a much different message to young people, than is being taught in the home. Much of our media and propaganda casts a negative light on the adolescent years, providing little hope for all involved.

Findings by Thorkildsen (Thorkildsen, 2007) support this in the article *Adolescents’ Moral Engagement in Urban Settings* (Thorkildsen, 2007). This article presents three major topics regarding adolescents and moral actions. First, the article discusses several previous

studies presenting data showing the importance of teachers and parents providing positive feedback to adolescents, and building strong relationships with young people, in helping them to develop morally. Next, the topic of moral engagement is introduced and defined. Lastly, strategies for discussing morality with young people are presented.

Throughout the article, earlier studies are referenced, highlighting the importance of positive feedback in making an impact on a young person's life. The studies discussed, all point to the benefits of positive reinforcement. In most of the research presented, three control groups were used in school settings. The first groups received positive feedback and praise, indicating their work was meeting expectations. It should be noted, positive feedback was provided even if students were not performing up to expectations. The second groups were presented with negative feedback. Comments to these students were presented indicating things they "should" be doing. This wording seemed to imply the students were not currently meeting expectations. The third groups were presented with no feedback on their performance, whatsoever (Thorkildsen, 2007).

The results for the studies referenced in the article, were all the same. The groups of adolescents who were told they were meeting expectations, all showed behavior improvements, both short-term and long-term. The remaining two control groups, those receiving no feedback, as well as those receiving the negative feedback, showed the same results. In both cases, there were no behavioral changes (Thorkildsen, 2007)

Based on the findings presented, the author expressed serious concern of the negative images and feedback presented to many adolescents through media, society, teachers and parents. The author even suggests the portrayal of adolescence as a time full of delinquent and

inappropriate behavior actually does more to increase the likelihood of young people engaging in such negative activities (Thorkildsen, 2007).

In defining moral engagement, Thorkildsen states (Thorkildsen, 2007), “Moral engagement concerns questions of justice, ethical conduct and reactions to interpersonal circumstances. This form of engagement controls the regulation of humane behavior and the inhibition of inhumane behavior because it represents a vision of how the world ought to function.” (pp. 115).

In putting his work into practice, Thorkildsen offers four suggestions for parents and educators to begin talking with young people about ethical issues. The first suggestion is to introduce adolescents to ethical dilemmas, whenever possible, in the course of everyday conversation. Next, adults can gently ask lots of questions even if they appear to be leading. Because adolescents benefit from hearing both sides of an issue, another strategy is to engage them in small group discussions, where they can both express their opinions and hear those of others. Lastly, parents and educators can offer young people plenty of opportunities to express themselves (Thorkildsen, 2007).

Discussion

The author makes a strong case for the negative picture our society paints of the adolescent’s life. When reading through the results of the studies, it appears our society almost sets these young people up for failure. Most of their sensory input suggests these years are miserable, requiring much therapy and medication to endure. Little is presented to them about the positive things occurring in their lives, expanding their creative thinking, growing independence, transformation into adulthood and relationship development.

In this time of questioning and change, adolescents need a solid message and support structure to depend on. It only makes sense for parents and educators to be sending consistent, clear messages about proper and right behavior, to help young people develop into healthy, moral adults.

References

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