

Child Development: Stages of Moral Development

Introduction

Moral development is a topic of interest in psychology, education, and catechesis. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg modified and expanded upon Jean Piaget's work to form a theory that explained the development of moral reasoning. In order to be effective in helping our learners form Catholic consciences, it is important for catechists to understand different levels of moral reasoning as well as the body of Catholic moral teaching. This segment is meant to help you reflect on how moral reasoning develops and the fundamentals of Catholic moral teachings that are presented throughout a curriculum. Just follow the outline. Begin by reflecting or journaling on the *first question*. Then read the article "Theories of Moral Development" and jot down your responses to the *reflection questions*.

First Question

When you are faced with a moral decision how do you decide what is right?

Theories of Moral Development

Read the following article and respond to the questions:

Kohlberg's theory of moral development outlined six stages within three different levels. He extended the moral components of Piaget's theory of cognitive development, proposing that moral development is a continual process that occurs throughout one's lifespan. The following outlines those stages.

Level 1: Preconventional Morality

Stage 1—Obedience and Punishment

The earliest stage of moral development is especially common in young children, but adults are also capable of expressing this type of reasoning. At this stage, children see rules as fixed and absolute. Obeying the rules is important because it is a means to avoid punishment.

Stage 2—Individualism and Exchange

At this stage of moral development, children account for individual points of view and judge actions based on how they serve their own individual needs. Reciprocity is possible, but only if it serves one's own interests. This is often called pleasure/pain stage. What gives me pleasure is right.

Level 2: Conventional Morality

Stage 3—Interpersonal Relationships

Often referred to as the “good boy-good girl” orientation, this stage of moral development is focused on living up to social expectations and roles. There is an emphasis on conformity, being “nice,” and consideration of how choices influence relationships.

Stage 4—Maintaining Social Order

At this stage of moral development, people begin to consider the social group when making judgments. The focus is on maintaining law and order, by following the rules, doing one's duty, and respecting authority.

Level 3: Post-Conventional Morality

Stage 5—Social Contract and Individual Rights

At this stage, people begin to account for the differing values, opinions, and beliefs of other people. Rules of law are important for maintaining a society, but members of the society should agree upon these standards.

Stage 6—Universal Principles

Kohlberg’s final level of moral reasoning is based upon universal ethical principles and abstract reasoning. At this stage, people follow these internalized principles of justice, even if they conflict with laws and rules.

Theories can help us understand ourselves and the world around us through a perspective. Kohlberg’s theory can be very illuminating for catechists. For example, why do second-graders give the best answers about how Jesus loves us and we should be kind and loving to our neighbors, and just a few minutes later they are involved in an argument over some shared item? Because they know the facts, but they are at Stage 2 of moral reasoning and it can be painful to share.

As catechists, we have other things to consider when helping young people “grow” their moral behavior: grace and the movement of the Holy Spirit in the development of conscience. Conscience is a gift from God that helps us judge whether our actions are right or wrong. It guides us to do good and avoid evil. Our consciences are guided by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Each of us is at a certain “stage” of moral reasoning. Each of us has “content” on which we can reflect as we make decisions with our conscience. As people of faith, we can call on the Holy Spirit as a guide as we look at the content of the Ten Commandments, the Great Commandment, the Beatitudes, the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy, the guidance of Scriptures, and the other teachings of the

Church. The role of a catechist is to make that content clear to those who are being catechized, to be aware of and respectful of the level of moral reasoning a child or adult has become, and to help them move to the next level of reasoning by using activities such as story, witness, role-playing, case studies, discussion, sharing of ideas, and teaching young people how to make well-informed decisions.

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching is also a very essential part of moral development. It helps us understand, and put into practice, the two great commandments Jesus proclaimed: love God totally, and love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:25–27).

In the words of Jeremiah, God made it clear that we cannot know him unless we embrace the cause of the poor. Comparing the current king of Israel with the king's father, Jeremiah tells the new king:

“Did not your father eat and drink and do justice, and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 22:15–16).

Knowing God means promoting justice for the poor. Even more directly, Jesus tells us, “. . . just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25:45). John seals the deal when he writes, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Jesus gave us many examples of what it means to love our neighbor through personal encounters; what the Church calls the Corporal Works of Mercy. He also made it clear that “neighbor” means all persons.

The great landmark in Catholic social teaching in our own time was the 1971 World Synod of Bishops’ document *Justice in the World*. It elevated the status of Catholic social teaching to one of the “constitutive dimensions” of Christian life.

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.” (*Justice in the World*, “Introduction”).

Implied here is a four-fold challenge:

- **Action.** Our response involves more than just awareness and understanding, more than just preaching and teaching.
- **Justice.** We are called to challenge every oppressive situation in society.
- **Gospel.** If the sermon does not include an application to justice in the world, then the Gospel isn’t being preached. If parish life does not include a justice and peace component, if our Christian lives don’t include some advocacy for justice, then the Gospel is not being lived.
- **Redemption.** Jesus and the Creator beg us and challenge us to help transform the world and redeem the human race.

What an incredible and challenging call! Catholic social teaching helps us understand the implications and application of the central proclamation “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It is the vision behind Catholic moral teaching.

Reflection Questions

- What stage of moral reasoning do you use most often?
- What are three ways you will use this material in your sessions with young people?