

Moral development in early childhood classrooms: Putting relationships first

What early childhood teacher hasn't heard, "You're not my friend anymore!" or "You can't play with us because you don't have a baseball glove (or other object or trait.)" Or even an ENTIRE class of excited 4-year-olds chanting "Poop! Poop! Poop! Poop!" right in the middle of lunchtime?

These are all common occurrences in any preschool classroom on any given day. They are also a tiny fraction of the types of outbursts that routinely derail group time, transition times, instructional times, and play times. As teachers, we often respond to these situations quickly and with rote reminders to "Use your words," or "Say you're sorry," because, let's face it, we have a lot to do and little time to do it!

These situations have more in common than their ability to drive teachers crazy, however. They are also opportunities to support children's moral development, or growing understanding of right and wrong. The goal of this article is to give early childhood educators practical tools to do just that.

Why make moral development a priority?

Conflict and misunderstandings are natural occurrences in a child's day. Even though the types of dilemmas that children face may not seem critical on the surface, they often involve deeper moral issues of right and wrong, justice and fairness, intention, and expectations.

The teacher's response to children's conflicts, misunderstandings, and difficult behavior sends unspoken messages about the moral priorities in the classroom. Do you trust children to make decisions and have some control over the classroom? Do you take children's intentions and desires into account when making decisions? Do you apply rules in a rigid manner no matter the circumstances, or is there room for discussion and negotiation when safety is not a concern?

Whether an early childhood curriculum explicitly includes morality or not, adult responses to the questions above impact the classroom's socio-moral atmosphere, and, in turn, the children's moral development. Research shows that moral development is closely linked to cognitive, social, and emotional development (Wadsworth, 2004).

It's essential, therefore, that early childhood educators have reasonable expectations for children regarding moral behavior as well as tools to help bring moral curriculum out of the background and into the forefront of their teaching.

What is morality and how does it develop?

At its most basic, morality is not just the ability, but the internal desire to follow the golden rule, "Treat others as you want to be treated." True morality goes beyond simple obedience to specific social rules and acting in prosocial ways only to avoid punishment.



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True morality is an internal code that governs our interactions with other people. To engage in truly moral behavior, we must be able to take another's point of view, look beyond the results of others' actions to infer their intentions, and sometimes put our own desires on hold for the benefit of another person or group (DeVries & Zan, 1994).

Preschool children have difficulty taking on others' perspectives and reasoning about abstract ideas such as fairness or justice. Before elementary school, children typically view rules as arbitrary adult creations and breaking a rule is only as bad as the punishment the rule-breaker receives. Lying, for example, is usually considered wrong only if the liar is caught and punished (Wadsworth, 2004).

For preschoolers, **intention** often plays little to no part in the child's determination about whether another's actions are good or bad. A friend who accidentally knocks down a block tower is just as bad as the one who does it out of anger. Due to their inability to see beyond their own perspective and desires, children's socio-moral interactions at this stage are often forceful (hitting, grabbing), sneaky (taking a friend's seat the moment she gets up even if it is clear she is coming back), or coercive ("If you don't give me that, then you can't come to my birthday party").

Fulfilling their own desires tends to be the preschooler's main goal rather than more social goals, such as prolonging a positive interaction with a friend. While this can make it seem that children lack empathy, they often just need help to de-center and think about others' feelings before responding to a situation.

As children reach elementary school and middle childhood, they begin to see intention as important and realize that rules are not just meaningless restrictions on behavior, but are in place to promote fair play and positive interaction. Although children at this age are more capable of factoring intentionality into their understanding of moral situations, they still see rules as relatively fixed and unchangeable. They are able to use higher-level skills, such as negotiation, to settle disagreements. Their goals more often center around their desires to continue playing with peers, even if that means putting aside their own needs.

It is not until children approach adolescence, however, that they are able to de-center even further and

see moral rules as agreements among groups that can be changed if everyone in the group supports the change. True collaboration emerges at this stage.

The role of self-regulation and scaffolding in socio-moral development

"Regulation cuts across all aspects of human adaptation. Living and learning require people to react to changing events and then to regulate their reaction" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Like learning to read, write, add, or subtract, learning to get along in a group and behave in socio-moral ways requires children to focus, listen, wait, and often put their own desires on hold for a time. The areas of the brain that control these functions are just beginning to develop in the young child (Sigel & Bryson, 2011).

While preschool age children may not spontaneously use higher-level prosocial skills, they can begin to use them with the help of more capable others, including adults and peers (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Adults can support children's self-regulation and help them practice moral behavior by providing consistent, warm, and calm guidance. They cannot, nor should they try, to rush children from one stage to the next. Like other areas of development, children construct their understanding of morality through trial and error and with LOTS of practice.

Supporting moral development in the early childhood classroom

So what does a positive socio-moral environment look like? How can teachers create a classroom atmosphere that supports moral development? And how can teachers bring intentionality to their classroom's socio-moral climate while still focusing on the million other moving parts of the day?

In their work looking at the links between moral development and constructivist education (that is, an open-ended approach to curriculum that allows children to construct their own knowledge), DeVries and Zan (1994) discovered significant differences in children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes depending on the socio-moral atmosphere in their preschool classrooms. Here is a summary of their findings.

In a positive socio-moral atmosphere, the teacher:

- interacted with children in a generally warm, affectionate, and respectful way.

- helped children feel ownership of the classroom by giving them some autonomy over how they would spend their day.
- listened to children and tried to understand their perspective in order to provide guidance as needed.
- encouraged children to work together and supported them through conflict.
- used real-world situations to help children learn academic concepts, such as how to divide a limited amount of snack equally among the group. The teacher guided children with suggestions and reminded them of the goal to be fair, but allowed them to make mistakes as they figured out an answer.
- used natural consequences to guide children's behavior.
- did not use threats, shame, guilt, or whole-class punishment (such as taking away outside time) to control children's behavior.

In a positive socio-moral atmosphere, the children:

- interacted with each other in a generally positive and cooperative way. They used more high-level social skills, such as negotiation, than other classrooms.
- were more self-regulated than other classrooms. They continued working even when the teacher left the room.

In a positive socio-moral atmosphere, the environment:

- was arranged to offer many hands-on, age-appropriate activities.

- was planned to encourage small-group interactions over whole-group or individual activities.
- In a negative socio-moral atmosphere, the teacher:**
- had interactions with children that were often harsh, judgmental, punitive, or emotionally disengaged.
 - valued correct answers to specific content questions and made little effort to understand children's reasoning and/or errors in logic in order to support their deeper understanding of a subject area.
 - often used whole-group drills to teach academic concepts.
 - closely managed children's work to make sure they made no mistakes.
 - maintained rigid control over children's behavior using shame, guilt, and whole-class punishment to promote compliance.
 - often treated children's requests for help as suspect.
- In a negative socio-moral atmosphere, the children:**
- interacted with each other in sneaky, forceful, and coercive ways.
 - showed confusion about the teacher's expectations, which led to whining and tattling.
 - were less self-regulated. They stopped working, ran around the classroom, and destroyed materials when the teacher left the room.

In a negative socio-moral atmosphere, the environment:

- was arranged with few engaging materials. Dittos and worksheets were at the center of the curriculum.
- was set up to discourage children from interacting with one another.

It is clear from these findings that there are real differences in the overall tone of the classroom when relationships and interaction are at the center of the curriculum. Just as filling a classroom with books, print, and writing materials will support a child's growing literacy skills, filling a classroom with positive adult-child and peer interactions will support their growing moral development. But how do we get there? What specific strategies can teachers put in place to foster a positive socio-moral atmosphere in their classroom?

Put relationships and interaction at the center of the curriculum

If the goal of moral development is for children to eventually have an internal sense of right and wrong

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and the desire to treat others with respect, the classroom must be a place where they can practice thinking about others' perspectives. Because this does not come naturally to young children and requires a tremendous amount of self-regulation, it falls to teachers to set up an environment and schedule that allows space for children to have conflicts, make mistakes, talk things through, and, above all, receive positive support from adults they trust.

Try using some of the following tools and techniques to help foster more positive socioemotional interactions and relationships. Encourage interactions that are respectful of individual differences and preferences that help all children know that their voices (and feelings) will be recognized and respected.

Allow children to vote. Use voting to make simple classroom decisions such as which book to read, which snack to eat, or which activity to play outside. Write or draw the choices you are voting on across the top of a piece of paper and have children write their name or place a sticker under their choice. Count together to see which column has the most votes. Using paper and visual aids rather than raising hands helps children learn that in order to be fair, each person gets only one vote.

Have children make rules. Give children ownership of the socio-moral atmosphere by encouraging them to help make the classroom rules. Discuss the need for rules during circle time and explain their objective—to keep our bodies and materials safe. Write down each child's ideas and keep the list posted throughout the year. Take all suggestions seriously, but ask children to revise their rule if it does not meet the criterion of keeping our bodies and materials safe. Remind children of the rules when they forget to follow them and encourage them to add new rules to the list as new situations arise.

Assign classroom jobs. Give children classroom jobs, such as line leader, table washer, and gerbil feeder to help them feel ownership over the classroom. Make sure there are enough jobs so each child can have one. Use pictures to represent each job and place each child's picture or written name on a separate card with a piece of Velcro® on the back.

Decide how long each job will last—a day, a week, a month—and open circle by reminding children of their jobs or choosing new ones. Keep the jobs on display on a bulletin board or poster so they can reference it easily. Instead of having children choose

their own job, try rotating them in a predictable way, such as by moving everyone down one space. This helps children learn to use rules to create fairness and reassures them that everyone will have the chance to do every job.

Explore socio-moral dilemmas. Help children de-center—broaden their perspectives away from their personal interests—and learn to think about how to respond to socio-moral problems using puppets or social stories. Present a scenario, either real-life or hypothetical, and encourage children to consider what they would do to help a puppet solve a problem. This allows children to think things through when they are already calm and focused. You can then remind them of these solutions if the situation comes up again later.

Practice self-regulation strategies as a group. Learning to be still and focus on the body and breath is a powerful tool to help children (and adults) calm down when strong emotions arise. Practice these strategies as a group and then remind the children to use them when conflicts arise.

- Ring a bell or triangle or download a gong app and have children take deep breaths until the tone subsides.
- Shake a glitter ball or snow globe (you can find instructions for making your own here: <https://preschoolinspirations.com/6-ways-to-make-a-calm-down-jar/>). Have children practice being still or taking deep breaths until all the glitter falls to the bottom.
- Practice two or three simple yoga poses or have children lie on their backs and feel their bellies as they take deep breaths.

Emphasize hands-on, play-based small groups. Preschoolers are still developing the ability to regulate their feelings and behavior. Instead of whole-group and teacher-directed activities, offer small groups in which children play and use all their senses in learning.

- Rather than using dittos and worksheets to teach specific concepts, set up interest centers with age-appropriate materials that allow children to have hands-on experience with a variety of concepts. See the list of curriculum resources at the end of this article.
- Rotate materials regularly so children stay interested and readily engage with different materials.
- Reduce scuffles over materials and space and set

children up for positive interactions with their peers by limiting the number of children allowed to work in a center at one time. Use signs or other visual aids to help them remember how many children are allowed in each center.

- Move from group to group so you are available to scaffold interactions and help with conflict as needed.

Make conflict resolution a priority. Although it may seem easier to tell children to use their words or say “I’m sorry,” remember that in the long run, children gain independence and build positive socio-emotional skills if you spend some time helping them learn to solve conflict on their own. Each time you scaffold children’s interactions, you help them to practice de-centering. As children become better at doing this, you will find yourself intervening less and less.

When you hear conflict erupt, follow these steps:

1. Approach the children calmly, get down on their level. If they are fighting over a toy, neutralize it by placing it out of reach or behind your back. Reassure them that you will give the toy back once the problem is solved.
2. Remind children of the calm-down strategies they’ve practiced at circle time. Try using phrases such as “We can solve problems better if everyone is calm” or “This problem will wait for us. Let’s calm our bodies and come back to it.”
3. Validate children’s feelings (“I know you’re upset about....”) and desires (“I know you really

want...”). This reassures them that you care about their needs and also puts words to their feelings. Naming feelings is a powerful tool for helping children switch gears from a reactive to a reflective state of mind when they feel powerless and out of control (Siegel & Bryson, 2011).

4. Give everyone a turn to voice the problem and then restate what they’ve said.
5. Ask the children for solutions. Offer ideas if they have none, or ask nearby children for advice if they have been listening.
6. Restate each suggestion and ask the children to agree on one that works for everyone.
7. Accept their decision even if it is not the one you would have chosen.

Minimize transition times. Transition times are challenging for everyone. We—adults and children—like to anticipate and plan for whatever is coming next. In the classroom, it’s wise to minimize transitions, especially those that are clock driven and devised for the convenience of adults rather than the needs of children.

Some transitions, however, are inevitable and essential. Sometimes transitions generate behavioral challenges that rock the positive socioemotional atmosphere.

Try these techniques for minimizing conflicts and building pro-social skills at clean-up time and meal-time transitions.

- Give children a warning that a transition is happening soon, and then accept that it is difficult for young children to switch gears from playing to cleaning even with a warning.
- If a child is having difficulty, acknowledge the feelings (“I know you were having such a good time playing with those trains and it’s hard to stop.”). Offer assistance (“How about I clean up the red ones and you do the green ones?”).
- Capitalize on children’s natural desire to be helpful and support positive peer interactions by enlisting other children to help a struggling friend. (“Katie is having a hard time cleaning up the trains. Mateo played with the trains yesterday. Maybe he can show Katie how to clean them up.”)
- Foster children’s sense of ownership over the classroom by reminding them that caring for our classroom means putting materials away so they do not get damaged. This also demonstrates that rules are not arbitrary; if materials are damaged,

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- then children will not be able to play with them.
- Use mealtimes as an opportunity to promote positive interactions between the children in a relaxed atmosphere.
 - Create a predictable routine for the start of mealtimes such as dismissing children from circle to wash hands, retrieve their lunchboxes, and choose their seats. Children are more likely to self-regulate when they know what to expect.
 - Allow children to sit where they wish and place yourself near groups that may need the most assistance, but don't feel the need to guide their conversations. It is natural that the teacher will be moving around during mealtimes to help with serving, opening packages, and assisting with spills.
 - Give children a sense of ownership by having them assist with mealtime cleanup. Provide washcloths, small spray bottles with soapy water, and child-sized brooms to pique their interest in helping.
 - Create a predictable routine for the end of mealtimes such as having children put their lunchboxes in their cubbies, use the restroom, wash their hands, and then read a book or play with table toys until the next activity begins.

Morality develops through relationships

The goal of moral development is for children to regulate their own social behaviors because it's the right thing to do, not just because they want to avoid punishment. A child's ability to do this may not fully develop until late childhood. Early childhood teachers provide children with some of the first moral experiences they will remember.

Help them make the most of this time by putting relationships at the center of the curriculum and allowing children to practice socio-moral behaviors and self-regulation in real-life situations throughout the classroom.

Curriculum resources for teachers

- Bos, B., Cochran, M. V., & Burton, D. (1982). *Don't move the muffin tins: A hands-off guide to art for the young child*. Roseville, CA: Turn the Page Press.
- Daly, L., & Beloglovsky, M. (2015). *Loose parts: Inspiring play in young children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- DeVries, R. (2002). *Developing constructivist early*

- childhood curriculum: Practical principles and activities*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Greenman, J. T. (2007). *Caring spaces: Children's environments that work*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.
- Moomaw, S., & Hieronymus, B. (2017). *More than magnets: Science activities for young children, pre-school and kindergarten*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Schwartz, S. L., & Copeland, S. M. (2010). *Connecting emergent curriculum and standards in the early childhood classroom: Strengthening content and teacher practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.

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