



PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FORMATION OF MORAL VALUES IN PRESCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21269428>

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Abstract: *Preschool childhood (approximately three to seven years of age) is a sensitive period for the emergence of the earliest stable moral values. During these years the child moves from external, adult-regulated obedience toward the gradual internalisation of social norms and the formation of a rudimentary moral self. This article examines the psychological characteristics of that process, integrating classical and contemporary theoretical perspectives with an analysis of the developmental dynamics of four core moral components: empathic responsiveness, prosocial behaviour, moral judgement, and moral self-regulation. The paper outlines the principal psychological mechanisms involved (identification, imitation, emotional anticipation, internalisation, and self-evaluation), describes their age-related transformation, and discusses the socio-psychological conditions that either facilitate or hinder healthy moral development. A summarising table of developmental stages and a comparative chart of component dynamics are provided. The findings underscore that moral value formation in early childhood is not a process of passive assimilation but an active, emotionally saturated reconstruction of social experience, mediated by the quality of the child's relationships with significant adults and peers.*

Keywords: *moral development, moral values, preschool age, empathy, prosocial behaviour, internalisation, self-regulation, developmental psychology.*

Introduction

The formation of moral values constitutes one of the central tasks of personality development, and its foundations are laid considerably earlier than is often assumed. Long before a child can articulate abstract ethical principles, he or she begins to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable conduct, to respond emotionally to the distress of others, and to experience the first stirrings

of pride, shame, and guilt. These early acquisitions are not peripheral; they form the affective and behavioural matrix upon which all later moral reasoning is built. For this reason, the study of moral value formation in preschool age is of enduring importance for developmental and educational psychology alike.

Moral values may be understood as relatively stable, internalised standards that orient a person toward what is



regarded as good, fair, and worthy within a given culture, and that acquire a personal, motivating significance for the individual. In the preschool years these standards exist initially in an external form - as the requirements, prohibitions, and evaluations expressed by adults - and only gradually become the child's own. The psychological core of moral development at this stage is therefore the transformation of an external regulator into an internal one, a process classically described as internalisation.

The aim of this article is to characterise the psychological features of this transformation. The discussion proceeds from a review of the principal theoretical frameworks, through an analysis of the underlying psychological mechanisms, to a description of the age-related dynamics of the main

moral components. Particular attention is paid to the conditions that shape the trajectory of moral development, and to the practical implications for educators and parents.

Theoretical Foundations

Contemporary understanding of early moral development rests on several complementary theoretical traditions, each illuminating a different facet of the same phenomenon. The cognitive-developmental tradition, originating with Jean Piaget and extended by Lawrence Kohlberg, emphasises the structural reorganisation of moral reasoning. Piaget characterised the young child's morality as heteronomous: rules are perceived as fixed, externally imposed, and sacred, and

the gravity of a misdeed is judged primarily by its visible consequences rather than by the intention behind it. The preschooler thus tends to evaluate an act that accidentally causes large damage as worse than a deliberately mischievous act that causes little damage—a hallmark of the so-called objective responsibility characteristic of this period.

The psychoanalytic and neo-analytic traditions draw attention to the emotional and motivational substrate of conscience. They locate the origins of moral self-regulation in the child's identification with significant adults and in the gradual formation of an internal evaluating agency. From this perspective, the affective bond between child and caregiver is not merely a backdrop to moral learning but its very engine: the desire to preserve the love and approval of the attachment figure motivates the child to adopt that figure's standards as his or her own.

Social-learning and socio-cognitive theory, associated above all with Albert Bandura, foregrounds observational learning, modelling, and reinforcement. Children acquire moral conduct in large part by observing the behaviour of others and the consequences that follow it, and by gradually developing capacities for self-reactive evaluation. The cultural-historical tradition of Lev Vygotsky adds a crucial dimension: moral development is understood as fundamentally social in origin. Higher psychological functions, including moral self-regulation, first



appear in shared activity between the child and adults and only subsequently become internal. The adult, the peer group, and culturally elaborated norms thus constitute the indispensable social medium within which individual conscience takes shape.

Modern research complements these classical accounts by demonstrating that even infants display rudimentary sensitivity to helping and hindering, and that empathic concern emerges remarkably early. Such findings suggest that the preschooler is not a moral blank slate but an active participant who brings biologically prepared dispositions to the socialisation process.

Taken together, these traditions converge on a single integrative proposition: moral development cannot be reduced to any one of its facets. Cognitive structure, emotional resonance, behavioural learning, and cultural mediation operate jointly and reciprocally. A child may possess the empathic capacity to feel another's distress yet lack the volitional control to act upon it; another may know the rule yet feel no compunction at breaking it. Mature morality requires the gradual coordination of knowing, feeling, and doing—a coordination that is precisely what the preschool years begin to accomplish. It is for this reason that no single theory, taken alone, can adequately explain early moral growth, and why a synthetic perspective has become the prevailing standard in contemporary developmental psychology.

Psychological Mechanisms of Moral Value Formation

Several interrelated psychological mechanisms underlie the formation of moral values in early childhood. Identification is among the most fundamental: the child assimilates the characteristics, attitudes, and evaluations of admired and loved adults, taking them as a model of how to be. Through identification, external standards acquire personal meaning, for the child no longer obeys merely to avoid punishment but in order to resemble a cherished figure.

Closely related is imitation and modelling, whereby the child reproduces observed patterns of conduct. Significantly, children imitate not only what adults explicitly teach but also what adults actually do; a discrepancy between precept and example tends to undermine the credibility of the verbal norm. A third mechanism is emotional anticipation—the developing capacity to foresee, in advance of acting, the emotional consequences of one's conduct for oneself and for others. As emotional anticipation matures, the regulation of behaviour shifts from after-the-fact reaction toward before-the-fact restraint, which is a decisive step in the consolidation of moral self-control.

Internalisation denotes the gradual transformation of external requirements into internal convictions and of external control into self-control. Its progress can be traced in the changing reasons children give for behaving morally: from 'so that I am not punished', through 'so that adults



praise me', toward 'because it is right' and 'because the other would feel hurt'. Finally, self-evaluation and the moral emotions of pride, shame, and guilt provide the affective feedback that stabilises internalised standards. When a child experiences guilt after a transgression even in the absence of an observing adult, one may speak of the genuine beginnings of conscience.

It is important to stress that these mechanisms do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another within the flow of everyday interaction. Identification supplies the motive to imitate; imitation furnishes the concrete behavioural content; emotional anticipation transforms repeated experience into the capacity for foresight; and self-evaluation closes the loop by rendering the child responsive to his or her own conduct. The efficiency of this system depends heavily on the consistency of the social

environment: when adult expectations are stable, clearly communicated, and emotionally supported, the mechanisms operate smoothly; when expectations are contradictory or enforced erratically, internalisation is impeded and the child is left dependent on external surveillance.

Age-Related Dynamics of Moral Development

Although moral development is continuous, it is useful to distinguish several qualitatively distinct phases within the preschool period. The transition from one phase to the next is marked not by the appearance of entirely new capacities in isolation but by a reorganisation of the relationship between emotion, cognition, and behaviour. Table 1 summarises the principal psychological characteristics of each phase, the dominant regulating mechanism, and the typical form in which moral norms are represented.

Table 1. Psychological characteristics of moral value formation across the preschool period

Age stage	Leading psychological feature	Dominant regulating mechanism	Representation of the moral norm
3–4 years	Situational, emotionally driven obedience; weak distinction between intention and outcome	External adult control; immediate emotional reaction	Norm exists only in the presence of the adult who states it
4–5 years	Growing sensitivity to evaluation; emergence of empathic concern and first prosocial acts	Desire for adult approval; imitation of valued models	Norm linked to a concrete rule and to praise or reproach
5–6 years	Emotional anticipation of consequences;	Incipient internal control; emerging moral	Norm partially detached from the situation;



Age stage	Leading psychological feature	Dominant regulating mechanism	Representation of the moral norm
	consideration of intention begins to appear	emotions (shame, guilt)	generalised across contexts
6–7 years	Relatively stable moral self-regulation; conduct guided by internalised standards even when unobserved	Self-evaluation; conscience as an internal agency	Norm experienced as a personal conviction with motivating force

As the table indicates, the youngest preschoolers regulate their conduct almost entirely through the immediate presence and emotional reactions of adults; the norm has, as it were, no existence apart from the adult who voices it. Across the subsequent years the locus of regulation shifts inward. By the end of the period a substantial proportion of children are capable of restraining a desired but prohibited action even when no adult is watching—a behavioural index of genuine internalisation that researchers frequently use to assess emerging conscience.

Comparative Dynamics of Moral Components

The four principal components of early morality—empathic responsiveness, prosocial behaviour, moral judgement, and moral self-regulation—do not develop at an identical pace. Empathic responsiveness and elementary prosocial acts emerge comparatively early and are already discernible in three- and four-year-olds, whereas reasoned moral judgement and stable self-regulation mature more slowly because they depend on advances in language, perspective-taking, and the inhibitory control of behaviour. Figure 1 presents the comparative dynamics of these four components across the preschool age range, expressed as the mean level of expression observed in developmental studies.

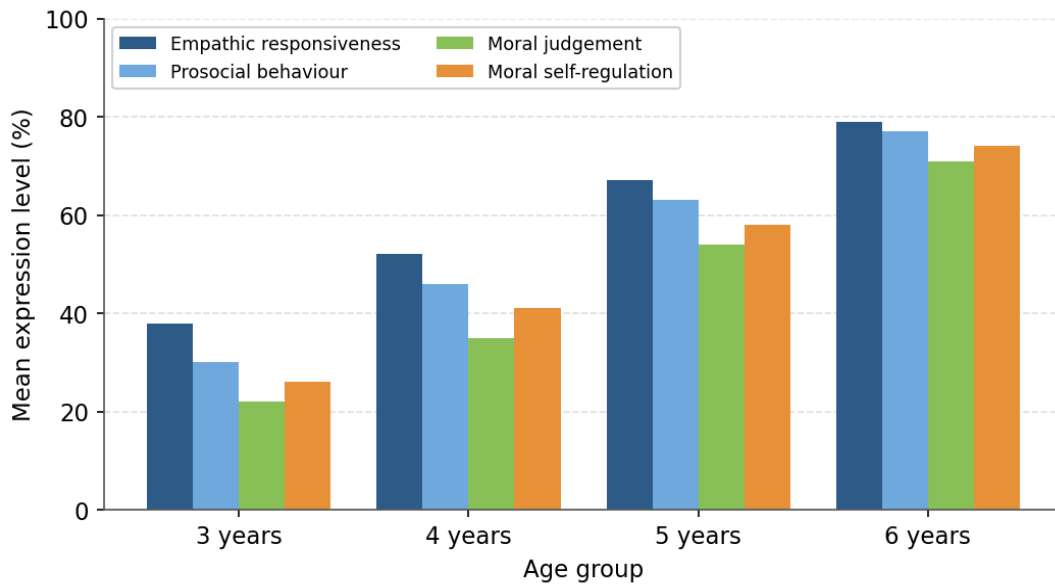


Figure 1. Comparative dynamics of the four core moral components across the preschool period (mean expression level, %).

Two regularities are apparent in Figure 1. First, every component rises steadily with age, reflecting the cumulative effect of maturation and socialisation. Second, and more instructively, the gap between the affectively grounded components (empathy and prosocial behaviour) and the cognitively grounded components (moral judgement and self-regulation) is widest among the youngest children and narrows progressively toward school entry. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical claim that early morality is primarily emotional in nature and only later becomes integrated with deliberate reasoning and volitional control. The convergence of the four curves by the age of six signals the emergence of a more coherent and self-consistent moral organisation—the psychological readiness

on which formal moral education at school can subsequently build.

Socio - Psychological Conditions of Moral Development

The trajectory sketched above is not predetermined; it is profoundly shaped by the social conditions of the child's life. The quality of attachment to caregivers is of first importance: a secure, warm, and responsive relationship furnishes both the motivation to adopt adult standards and the emotional security that makes self-criticism tolerable rather than overwhelming. Where the relationship is cold, inconsistent, or punitive, moral regulation tends to remain external and fragile, sustained only by fear of detection.

The style of adult guidance is likewise decisive. Explanatory, reasoning-based discipline—often termed induction—which draws the child's



attention to the consequences of his or her actions for others, fosters empathy and the internalisation of norms far more effectively than power-assertive methods that rely on threat and punishment. The consistency between what adults say and what they do, the emotional climate of the family and the preschool group, and the opportunities the child has for cooperative play all contribute to the outcome.

Peer interaction deserves particular emphasis. In play with age-mates the child encounters, on a footing of relative equality, the necessity of coordinating intentions, sharing resources, taking turns, and resolving conflicts. Such experiences cultivate perspective-taking and a sense of fairness that the asymmetrical child-adult relationship cannot fully provide. Role-play, in which the child voluntarily assumes and obeys the rules of an adopted role, is an especially powerful natural laboratory for the exercise of moral self-regulation.

Individual Differences and Developmental Difficulties

While the general sequence of moral development is broadly shared, its tempo and quality vary considerably from child to child. Differences in temperament are among the most influential sources of this variation. Children high in fearful, inhibited temperament tend to experience the moral emotions of anxiety and guilt readily, and may internalise norms even under relatively gentle discipline; for such children, harsh control is not only

unnecessary but potentially harmful. By contrast, more exuberant and fearless children rely less on anxious arousal and more on the positive motivation supplied by a warm, mutually responsive relationship with the caregiver. Recognising these dispositional differences allows adults to adjust their approach rather than applying a single method uniformly.

Cognitive and linguistic development also modulates moral growth. The capacity to take another's perspective, to represent intentions, and to reflect on one's own conduct depends on advances in language and executive function; delays in these domains are frequently accompanied by slower consolidation of moral self-regulation. Similarly, the richness of a child's emotional vocabulary - the ability to name and discriminate feelings in oneself and others - is closely linked to the development of empathy and to the comprehension of how one's actions affect others.

Certain difficulties warrant particular attention. Persistent aggression that disregards the distress of others, a conspicuous absence of guilt following transgressions, or, conversely, an excessive and disproportionate burden of shame may signal that moral development is following an atypical course and that additional support is required. In most cases, however, the apparent 'moral lapses' of preschoolers - lying to avoid punishment, taking what belongs to another, or failing to share - are



normal expressions of an immature regulatory system rather than evidence of an entrenched character flaw. Interpreting them as developmental rather than dispositional, and responding with patient explanation rather than severe sanction, is itself an important condition of healthy moral growth.

Pedagogical and Psychological Implications

The psychological characteristics reviewed here carry concrete implications for those who educate young children. Because early morality is emotionally rooted, the cultivation of empathy through shared attention to the feelings of others is more productive than the abstract recitation of rules. Because children imitate conduct rather than words, the consistent moral example of adults is indispensable. Because internalisation proceeds gradually, adults should calibrate their expectations to the child's developmental level, neither demanding a mature conscience prematurely nor neglecting to support its emergence.

Practically, this suggests favouring inductive, explanatory guidance over punitive control; providing rich opportunities for cooperative and rule-governed play; using stories and dramatisation to render moral situations vivid and emotionally meaningful; and responding to transgressions in a way that preserves the child's dignity while clarifying the harm done. Above all, it suggests that the affective relationship between child and educator is itself the

principal instrument of moral education, since it is through this relationship that external standards are transformed into personal values.

Conclusion

The formation of moral values in preschool-age children is an active, emotionally saturated, and socially mediated process rather than a passive absorption of ready-made rules. Across the preschool years the child advances from situational, externally controlled obedience toward an internalised and self-regulating morality, propelled by the mechanisms of identification, imitation, emotional anticipation, internalisation, and self-evaluation. The four core components of early morality develop unevenly, with affectively grounded empathy and prosocial behaviour preceding the more slowly maturing capacities of moral judgement and self-regulation, and gradually converging toward an integrated moral organisation by the threshold of schooling.

This developmental achievement is decisively conditioned by the quality of the child's relationships with significant adults and peers and by the style of guidance to which the child is exposed. Recognising the psychological characteristics of this period allows parents and educators to support moral development in a manner consonant with the child's nature—through warmth, reasoned explanation, consistent example, and meaningful shared activity—thereby laying a sound foundation for the moral



personality that will continue to develop throughout the school years and beyond.

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