

*Beyond “I’m Sorry”  
The Emergence of Conscience in Young Children*<sup>1</sup>

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Imagine being alone in an unfamiliar city. As you walk along a busy street one night, you collapse unconscious on the sidewalk. Will anyone help you?

In the next minute, your wellbeing will depend on the upbringing of strangers. Did they learn to fear all strangers? Will they simply pass you by, indifferent to your plight or fearful of getting involved? Or did they learn to care about others? Will at least one person, motivated by a conscience first nurtured in childhood, make the effort to help you, a stranger?

We are not born with a conscience. Conscience does not appear because of “message” books with moral lessons, or grade school campaign for character, or a high school course on ethics. Just as children are born to talk, go upright and eventually walk, seeking positive social engagement is part of the fabric of our humanity. Talking, walking, and caring, however, must have a catalyst to flourish. For conscience, this catalyst is the care and guidance of parents, teachers, and other loving adults.

The critical period for this catalyst is the first three years of life (Cozolino, 2006; Perry, 2000, 2010). During this time, brain structures necessary for interpreting social events, experiencing compassion, and making decisions necessary for conscience are being shaped and connected. During this period the limbic system of the brain (the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, and anterior cingulate gyrus) and its relationship to the prefrontal cortex are forming and beginning to connect.

The experiences we share with young children—hugging, touching, smiling, dancing, sharing, laughing, and guiding—all act in concert as a celebration of their lives that invites them to care about themselves and others. Before their fourth birthday, this invitation can set them on a trajectory for affirming life, for bringing happiness into the lives of others.

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## Defining conscience

What is conscience and how do we as early childhood educators contribute to its development? Conscience is *an internal voice that obliges us to act with kindness, respect, and fairness and to make things right as best we can when we do not*. The word “conscience” comes from the Latin *conscientia*, which literally means “knowledge within oneself, a moral sense.” To have a mature conscience is to know what is right and wrong in concert with others and to govern one’s actions by the shared principles that strengthen the human community.

Conscience begins in early childhood with compassion and sympathy followed by empathy. Compassion is an *emotional* experience synchronized with the emotions of another. Watch the faces of children when you read a book that arrives at an emotional moment. For example, if your face reveals the sadness felt by a character as you read, you may see their facial expressions mirroring your own. You have drawn them into the story, and they are in compassionate harmony.

Sympathy puts compassion into action. A four year old who approaches and hugs a classmate who is crying after his mother dropped him off at your center demonstrates sympathy.

Empathy is an *intellectual* experience that involves perception and understanding. With empathy, children recreate in their own minds the circumstances and experience of someone else. A three year old will bring his teddy bear to a classmate who is unwell. His response is based on his own experience. On the other hand, a five year old may involve the child’s teacher or mother. His response is based on the other child’s experience. With empathy, the emotional center of the brain connects to the outer thinking part, especially the prefrontal cortex.

Together, compassion, sympathy, and empathy form the foundations of conscience during early childhood. Consider their progression in these examples (Smith, 2009).

- At three months, babies can engage in mutual affect synchrony, an exchange between the baby and parent that is emotionally satisfying and positively arousing for both
- At six months, babies can engage a parent in brief “conversations” that involve cooing and gurgling with hand or finger movements and smiling or excited facial expressions

- At nine months, babies can respond with expressions of joy when the parent displays a happy face; when the parent shows a sad face babies show more sadness and avert their eyes
- A one year old can become agitated and disturbed when viewing someone in distress and appear to be upset when loved ones yell at each other
- Eighteen month olds can try to comfort a loved one who is visibly sad by means of a soothing voice or touch (although such attempts will be based on a child's experience)
- Two year olds can act as if they "know" what others feel (when they see a baby crying, for example, they might look sorrowful and say, "Baby is sad")
- At thirty months, children can pretend to be kind to a doll or stuffed animal (as in feeding their teddy bears)
- Three year olds can understand that other's experience has an effect on how they feel (a child may say, for example, "You sad mommy. You hurt finger")
- Four year olds can understand that the same situation can give rise to different emotions in different people

For a summary of research on conscience see Thompson, Meyer, and McGinley (2006) and for moral development see Gibbs (2010).

Imagine a three-year-old who sees a classmate fall off his tricycle and begin to cry. She stares at the child for a moment and then walks over to give him a hug. Her response is the result of a sequence of mental steps. First, she notices the crying. Then she recognizes that what happened was a problem. She concludes she could solve the problem by responding with a hug. Then she takes action. In just a few moments her childlike conscience *motivates* her to respond positively. She acted with purpose—to stop another child's suffering.

A conscience serves as a sort of compass. It guides us toward what we believe is true north. Sometimes doing the right thing has a cost. A four year old with two cookies sees another child with none. If he gives her one of his cookies, he will be making a sacrifice, a loss that might be compensated by the other child's happiness. As children grow up, the cost can require taking a risk. Consider an older child who sees a younger child being mercilessly bullied on the playground without an adult in sight. He knows that bullying is wrong. He knows the target is being harmed. Will his conscience move him to intervene to stop the cruelty?

Doing the right thing, acting consistent with our conscience, contributes to personal integrity. A conscience without courage will ultimately fail to successfully

motivate action and will not have the strength for self-respect to prosper (Smith 2004, 2005).

### Our role as teachers of young children

Although parents have a central role in the formation of conscience, teachers can make a unique contribution. We could be the first person outside of a child's family to have a special part in the child's life. We are also free of the dependence between children and their parents. Furthermore, we supervise and guide a caring community of other children that provides opportunities for social engagement and practice.

In *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Jean Piaget claimed that a relationship based on equality with peers has a fundamental effect on moral development. Peers, not parents or teachers, are a key source for the *shaping* of moral concepts such as reciprocity and justice. Most of us have heard one child make a claim based on equality with another child by insisting "That's not FAIR!"

Although the significance of peers increases considerably after preschool, a child's first relationships are an important part of building self-respect. This makes an early childhood group setting an important part of the child's moral life and the formation of conscience. Early childhood programs can be learning laboratories where children apply and test what they have learned at home and school in their relationships with peers.

Nurturing conscience is not something we achieve with a boxed curriculum or canned lesson plan. We can teach social skills and help them understand the difference between right and wrong. But we cannot teach children to feel sorry for what they have done. The core of conscience—the will or motivation to be kind—has to be *caught* not taught. We don't teach children to be happy. They are happy because they experience something joyful. In the same way, children accept our invitation to care by experiencing care personally.

What matters is establishing what psychologist Fritz Redl (1972) called *growth-producing relationships* with the children in our care. We ourselves become the primary teaching tool. A growth-producing relationship involves achieving two complimentary goals. First, we prove to children that we care by demonstrating warmth. Second, we prove to them that we are worthy of their admiration by demonstrating strength.

Authenticity is critical in our relationships with children; they may not understand what or why, but young children can sense authenticity. They can detect a phony smile or an indifferent hug. They know who likes them and who does not. They

are using the emotional part of their brain, the limbic system, which develops before the intellectual part, the cortex. They feel long before they can explain what they feel (Dimasio, 1999).

Proving we care about them

We cannot be effective teachers of young children from a distance. We invite children to care by proving that we care about them by

- Showing respect for children by moving to their eye level when they talk to us
- Responding in ways they find comforting when they are sad or angry or afraid
- Listening carefully to what they tell us and responding in words that show we understand
- Reaching out to gently touch them as part of our greeting when they arrive at our school and providing appropriate and genuine affection especially when they are in distress.
- Expressing joyful playfulness with them as we laugh, sing, dance, and give them “high fives” when they accomplish a difficult task
- Being happy see them when they arrive and tell them how much we missed them when they were absent

Motivating children to want to care also depends on proving that we are worthy of their admiration. Our influence as teachers, to make a real difference in the lives of children, depends on their respect for us. We demonstrate strength by

- Making principles of kindness, respect, and fairness and important part of classroom life
- Making what is important clear and simple for children
- Providing responsive, compassionate discipline

Warmth has to be balanced by the responsibilities of authority. Authority means providing guidance that makes our words matter.

Children need to know the borders of the behavior we will allow and will not allow in the classroom. The absence of structure causes anxiety. Too many rules are confusing. Young children first shape their conscience around what significant authority figures say is right and wrong. Saying something like, “You have two cookies. Your sister has none. Give her one of your cookies” creates a stronger impression than, “Would you like to share one of your cookies with your sister?” The first statement advocates kind action. There is no indecision, no hesitation by the adult. Children need this clarity. A

preschool teacher in a workshop on conscience told her colleagues that she had one primary rule in her classroom: do not hurt anyone on the inside or the outside.

Healthy children will test limits. There are moments when we all fail to listen to the voice of our conscience. Afterwards, we may feel our conscience urging us to make something right again. Unfortunately, adults may think they are teaching their children to make something right again by insisting that they tell someone, “I’m sorry” after being impolite or harmful. Young children, however, do not understand what “sorry” means and may not really feel sorrow over what they did.

Preschool children do not fully understand the responsibility for repairing a wrong. They know that they can harm someone. Being sorry, though, means contemplating the impact of what they have done and having regret for having done it. So being forced to say, “I’m sorry” can become a magic incantation of absolution, as though words alone are enough to free them from the consequences of their choices.

On several occasions as a head teacher, I overheard four year olds use the “I’m sorry” ritual after pushing, hitting, or grabbing a classmate’s toys. When they realized that a teacher was watching they would quickly look at the child who was crying and loudly declare, “I’m sorry!” When true sorrow and regret are present, the phrase “I’m sorry” can be powerful. These words are not a solution, however. “I’m sorry,” means something only as an authentic part of a response to make things right. Allowing children to evade responsibility by engaging in a pretense undermines their respect for us.

The caring and strength of a growth-producing relationship boosts our credibility and increases our effectiveness to nurture conscience. At the end of a long morning with a group of preschoolers, I was becoming increasingly nauseated. Just before the parents began to arrive, I sat down in one of the vacant wooden lockers where children kept their coats and put my head in my hands. Four-year-old Steven walked over to sit in the adjacent locker and copied me by putting his chin in his hands. “Steven,” I told him, “I am feeling very yucky and sick to my stomach.”

After a moment, Steven stood up and faced me. Then he patted my shoulder, looked me in the eyes, and with a serious expression and firm voice said, “That’s okay, dokter Smith. You go home and your mommy take care of you.” In his own lovely way, Steven saw my problem, sorted through how he might respond, and chose a caring solution that made sense to him. Our relationship mattered. He *wanted* to help, a sign of conscience in action.

Four teaching strategies

Each of these teaching strategies is effective when we have invested the time to establish our warmth and strength in a growth-producing relationship.

First, put what is worthwhile into a dramatic context with books, puppets, and storytelling. Children acquire social knowledge through stories. Stories can activate empathy and compassion. Children can project themselves into the story and feel a level of emotional involvement not possible in everyday conversation (Smith, 1989). We can see evidence of their compassion when their expressions mirror our own as we read or tell the story.

If we want a child to remember an idea, we can use a story to give it a dramatic context. Not any story though, certainly not one that is boring. Read and tell stories that have what Jane Yolen (2007) calls touch or tough magic. Stories with *tough* magic are for older preschoolers and often involve breathtaking grand drama like *Harald and the Great Stag* by Donald Carrick (1988). A young boy discovers that bragging about seeing the great stag in the forest has put the animal in grave danger from the king's hunters. At some risk to himself, he protects the stag by leading the hunters' dogs astray.

Stories with touch magic do their teaching in a gentle manner for all age groups. *You'll be sorry* is a cautionary tale by Josh Schneider (2007) for children as young as three. Samantha's parents warn her not to hit her brother. They tell her that she will be sorry. When she does (not pictured), the consequences are dramatic and outlandish, releasing a flood of tears that proves to her that her parents were right.

Second, shape a true caring community through group activities. Groups can be important for nurturing community in the classroom. Learning circle time is wonderful because everyone joins in close contact as equals. Add chanting and/or movement, and the children in the group become closer. Begin each circle time with a consistent chant or song to call children to the group. Shared rituals build community.

Create group activities with core moral themes that actively involve children (Smith 1993). For example, set a 2" x 6" board flat between two rugs. Pretend one rug is a mountain and the other is safety. One child pretends to be hurt on the mountain. Another child plays the rescuer who has to walk across the board to reach other child. Once there, the rescuer takes the "injured" classmate's hand and leads him or her back across the board to safety.

Third, use responsive victim-centered reasoning as a guidance tool. When children harm each other, consider what Martin Hoffman (2000) calls victim-centered reasoning. When a child hurts someone on the inside or the outside, instead of telling children to say they are sorry, we can emphasize the impact their behavior had on

another child. Then we can give them an opportunity to respond positively and repair the wrong. For example, four-year-old Mark deliberately shoved Amy to the floor. While one of my assistant teachers responded to a crying Amy, I gently put my arm around Mark's waist and told him "Mark, look at what you did! You pushed Amy down and hurt her. Look at her tears, the sad expression on her face."

Fourth, expect accountability. If the wrongdoing was deliberate and children know the rule, we may express our own disappointment and expect them to be accountable by repairing the wrong as best they can, sometimes with our help. After emphasizing the consequences of Mark's push I asked Amy, "Is it ok with you if Mark gets a wash cloth to dry your tears?" She nodded yes. Then I told Mark to get a clean damp washcloth and a dry towel. When Mark returned, I showed him how to gently wipe and dry Amy's cheeks, which he did without a problem. I never insisted on a phony "I'm sorry." Instead, Mark had the opportunity to be accountable for what he did.

If Mark refuses to help, he could watch a teacher provide the assistance. If Amy does not want Mark's help we can emphasize to Mark that her rejection is another consequence of what he did. Later in the day after everyone settles down we could talk to Mark and Amy about what happened and how it could have been prevented. Avoid asking "why" questions with young children, which put them on the defensive and expects them to reason beyond their years.

### The failure of conscience

What happens when nurturing fails, when children become casualties of enduring indifference or hostility during the first three years of life? Without a growth-producing relationship and the invitation to join a caring community, children will fail to develop a conscience, what makes them humane. Most teachers of young children can recall a child who was difficult to reach, who appeared to look at the world through hollow eyes.

These children do not seem to have any kind of emotional life. They do not care about others. If they want something, they get it without concern for consequences because they value themselves above all others. When they cause harm, they do not accept being accountable for what they have done. Others' tears do not touch their hearts. Their emotional life is a barren field frozen with snow. You never see these children cry or laugh. When you read a picture book to the group, you do not see their faces change in response to your sad, happy, and excited facial expressions. The children in your class avoid them. They typically play alone either indoors with blocks or outdoors in the sandbox.



These children seem to be slipping away from humanity. Pulling them into the caring community that surrounds them becomes increasingly difficult once they appear to be on this life-diminishing trajectory. We may feel helpless with these children and fearful for their future. How can we reach behind these eyes to touch their hearts? How can we work with the family to make ensure the child receives professional intervention?

What drove these children away in the first place? Were they trapped in a survival mode of retreating into themselves because of abuse, neglect, or failed attachments? Was there some flaw in their prenatal neurological development? It may be unfair to blame parents for their children's unsettling behavior. The reasons for this apparent departure from the caring part of humanity are incredibly complex and well beyond our understanding. There are too many underlying causes hidden from our view. Even so, part of the nobility of teaching is never giving up on a child. So we do the best we can with every child, hoping that our relationship will have ultimately have an impact.

Much of what we do as teachers of young children is an act of faith. We know the most important things in the lives of children are difficult to measure. We may not see the long-term impact of what we do. Our contributions are combined with that of parents and all the teachers who follow us. Even so, we are a part of children's lives when it makes the most difference. We contribute to the foundation for conscience and put into motion what may gradually become an enduring trajectory of caring in their lives. Then one day when they are adults and see someone collapse on a city street they will stop and then act decisively to do what they can to help.

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