

# Beyond “I’m Sorry”: The Educator’s Role in Preschoolers’ Emergence of Conscience

Charles A. Smith

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 minutes, your well-being will depend on the upbringing of strangers. Did they learn to fear all strangers? Will they simply pass 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?

**W**E ARE NOT BORN WITH A CONSCIENCE. CONSCIENCE does not appear because of “message” books with moral lessons or a grade school campaign for character or a high school course on ethics. Just as children are born to talk and walk, seeking positive social engagement is part of the fabric of our humanity. Talking, walking, and caring, however, must have catalysts to flourish. For conscience, the 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; Szalavitz & Perry 2010). During this time, brain structures necessary for interpreting social events, experiencing compassion, and making decisions necessary for conscience are being shaped and connected between the limbic system in the center of the brain and the prefrontal cortex.

## Defining Conscience

What is conscience and how can 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 means “knowledge within oneself, a moral sense.” To have a mature conscience is to know what is right and wrong and to govern one’s actions by the shared principles that strengthen the human community.



The positive experiences educators share with young children—hugging, touching, smiling, dancing, sharing, laughing, and guiding—celebrate them and invite them to care about themselves and others. When these experiences happen before a child’s fourth birthday, they can set that child on a trajectory toward affirming life and bringing happiness into the lives of others.

### **The foundation of conscience—Compassion, sympathy, and empathy**

Development of a conscience begins in early childhood with compassion and sympathy, followed by empathy. Compassion is an *emotional* experience—awareness of the emotions of another (awareness especially that someone is experiencing a negative feeling, coupled with wanting to provide help). While reading a book, watch the faces of children when you reach a character’s emotional moment. If your face reveals the emotions the character feels, you may see children’s facial expressions mirroring your own. You have drawn them into the story, and they are in compassionate harmony.

Sympathy puts compassion into action. When a 4-year-old approaches and hugs a classmate who is crying after his mother has dropped him off at the center, she 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 3-year-old may suggest giving a present to her 8-year-old sister that she herself would want. An empathetic 6-year-old may suggest a book about horses because her older sister talks about becoming a veterinarian. With empathy, the emotional center of the brain connects to the thinking part, especially the prefrontal cortex.

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

- At 3 months, babies can engage in *mutual affect synchrony*, an exchange between the baby and parent that includes echoing each other's smiles, gestures, and sounds. It is emotionally satisfying and positively arousing for both.
- At 6 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 9 months, babies can respond with expressions of joy to a parent's happy face; when a parent makes a sad face, babies show more sadness and avert their eyes.
- A 1-year-old can become agitated and disturbed when viewing someone in distress and will appear to be upset when loved ones yell at each other.
- At 18 months, a child can try to comfort a loved one who is visibly sad by means of a soothing voice or touch (although such attempts are based on the child's experience).
- At 2 years old, children can act as if they "know" what others feel (when seeing a baby crying, for example, 2-year-olds might look sorrowful and say, "Baby is sad").
- At 30 months, children can pretend to be kind to a doll or stuffed animal (as in feeding their teddy bears).
- At 3 years, children can understand that others' experiences have an effect on how those others feel (a child may say, for example, "You sad, Mommy. You hurt finger").
- At 4 years, children can understand that different people can respond to the same situation with different emotions (for example, Jason knows that when his brother loses a board game he becomes angry but when his sister loses, she claps enthusiastically for the winner).

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

Imagine that 3-year-old Ramona sees a classmate, Keon, fall off his tricycle and begin to cry. She stares at Keon for a moment and then walks over to give him a hug. Ramona's response is the result of a sequence of mental steps. First, she notices Keon is crying. She recognizes that what has happened—falling off his tricycle and hurting himself—is a problem. She concludes she can solve Keon's problem by giving him a hug. Then she takes action. In just a few moments, Ramona's developing conscience motivates her to respond positively. She acts with purpose—to stop another child's suffering.

## **A conscience without courage will ultimately fail to successfully motivate action; we all need inner strength for conscience and self-respect to prosper.**

A conscience serves as a sort of compass. It guides us toward what we believe is a right action. Sometimes doing the right thing has a cost. A 4-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 bullied on the playground. She knows that bullying is wrong. She knows someone is being harmed. There is no adult in sight. Will her conscience move her to intervene to stop the cruelty?

Doing the right thing, acting consistently with one's own conscience, contributes to personal integrity. A conscience without courage will ultimately fail to successfully motivate action; we all need inner strength for conscience and self-respect to prosper (Smith 2004, 2005).

### **The importance of growth-producing relationships**

Although families have a central role in the formation of conscience, teachers can make unique contributions. A teacher could be the first person outside of a child's family to play a special role in the child's life. Teachers are also free of the dependence between children and their families. Furthermore, teachers 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 ([1932] 1965) claims that relationships with peers based on equality have a fundamental effect on moral development. According to Piaget, peers, not parents or teachers, are most often the key source for shaping 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 children's moral lives and the formation of their conscience. Early childhood programs can be learning laboratories where children apply and test what they have learned at home and school through their relationships with peers.

Nurturing conscience requires more than the use of a curriculum or lesson plans that target social and emotional development. We can teach social skills and help children understand the difference between right and wrong. But just telling children to feel sorry for what they have done does not result in them actually feeling sorry. 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 joy in their lives.

What matters is establishing what psychologist Fritz Redl (1972) calls *growth-producing relationships* with the children in our care. Our actions as teachers become the primary teaching tool. A growth-producing relationship involves achieving two complementary 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 teachers' relationships with children; young children may not be able to define it, but they can sense authenticity. They will detect a phony smile or an indifferent hug. They know who likes them and who does not. They do this by using the emotional part of their brain, the limbic system, which develops before the intellectual part, the cortex. They experience feelings long before they can explain what they feel (Damasio 1999).

### Nurturing a conscience through warmth and guidance

Teachers of young children cannot be effective from a distance; we invite children to be motivated to care by:

- Showing respect for them when moving to their eye level as they talk to us

- Responding in ways children find comforting when they are sad, angry, or afraid
- Listening carefully to what children tell us and responding clearly to show we understand
- Providing appropriate and genuine affection, especially when they are in distress
- Showing we are happy to see children when they arrive and telling them how much we missed them when they were absent
- Expressing joyful playfulness as we laugh, sing, and dance with children or give them high fives when they accomplish a difficult task

Motivating children to want to care also depends on contributing to their understanding of the fundamental core principles that provide the basis for caring: being kind, respectful, fair, and honest. We strengthen the formation of these caring convictions by

- Setting clear and fair rules with simple words that reflect principles of caring. For example, we might tell children, "Hands are for hugging, not for hitting" or "Walking indoors is safer than running."
- Enforcing rules with immediate, reasonable, logical consequences that reinforce the principles. For example, we might expect a child who hurts another to provide care



**The absence of structure causes children anxiety, but too many rules are confusing. Children need the clarity of limits that are set by caring people they admire and respect.**



for the child he hurt or expect a child who rips another child's picture to reassemble the drawing as best she can.

- Showing forgiveness to restore our relationship with children following a consequence. For example, after telling a child to sit in the book corner to calm down after deliberately pushing a classmate, we approach and gently put our arm around her and say, "I care about you and about everyone's safety. Remember, hands are for hugging, not for pushing."

The warmth teachers convey to a child has to be balanced by the responsibilities of authority. Children learn that their teachers and school have core values that clearly define what is encouraged and what is discouraged in the classroom. They also learn that disregarding these established limits has reasonable consequences. The absence of

structure causes children anxiety, but too many rules are confusing. Children need the clarity of limits that are set by caring people they admire and respect.

Typically, young children test limits. There are moments when we all fail to listen to the voice of our conscience. Afterward, we may feel our conscience urging us to make things right again. Adults may think they are teaching 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 feeling regret for having done it. Simply saying "I'm sorry" can become a magic

incantation of absolution for some children, as though the words alone are enough to free them from the responsibility for and consequences of their choices.

On several occasions as a head teacher, I overheard 4-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 quickly looked at the child who was crying and loudly declared, “I’m sorry!” When true sorrow and regret are present, the phrase “I’m sorry” can be powerful. The words alone are not enough, however. “I’m sorry” has meaning only as an authentic part of a response to make things right. Allowing children to evade responsibility for their actions by engaging in a pretense (saying “I’m sorry” without meaning it) undermines children’s respect for parents and teachers, for other children, and for themselves.

The next section outlines actions teachers can use to help children develop their conscience.

### Four teaching strategies

After establishing your warmth and guidance in a growth-producing relationship, try these teaching strategies as tools for supporting the development of conscience in young children.

**Use books, puppets, and storytelling to provide children with scenarios that show characters following their conscience.** Children can acquire social knowledge through stories that activate empathy and compassion. By identifying with the characters, children can feel a level of emotional involvement not possible in everyday conversation (Smith 1989). We can see evidence of children’s compassion when their facial expressions and body language mirror our own as we read or tell the story.

To help a child remember a worthwhile idea, we can use a story to provide a dramatic context (Smith 2012). Educators can read and tell stories that have what Jane Yolen (2007) calls *touch or touch magic*. Stories with touch magic do their teaching in a gentle manner for all age groups.

James Marshall’s “George and Martha” books about two unusual hippo friends, are delightful examples of stories that entertain children while conveying important truths about relationships.

Stories with *tough magic* (as opposed to touch magic [Yolen 2007]) are for older preschoolers and often include breathtaking grand drama that involves courage and risk. For example, in *Harald and the Great Stag*, by Donald Carrick, a young boy discovers that his boasting 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.

**Use group activities to shape a true caring community.** Groups can be important for nurturing community in the classroom. Circle time is wonderful because everyone joins together in close contact as equals. Add chanting 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. Over time, as children learn the shared ritual, the sense of community grows.

Create small group activities with core moral themes that actively involve children (Smith 1993). For example, make a bridge between two rugs with a 6-foot-long 2 x 6 inch board. One rug is a mountain, the other is safety. A child pretends to be hurt on the mountain. Another child plays the rescuer who has to walk across the board to reach the hurt child. Once there, the rescuer takes her classmate’s hand and leads him back across the board to safety.

**Use responsive victim-centered reasoning as a guidance tool.** When children harm other children, consider what Martin Hoffman (2000) calls “victim-centered reasoning.” When a child hurts someone (on the inside or the outside), instead of telling that child to say “I’m sorry,” emphasize the impact the behavior has on the other child. Then give the child an opportunity to respond positively and repair the wrong.

For example, 4-year-old Mark deliberately shoved Amy to the floor. While an assistant teacher responded to a crying Amy, I gently put my arm around Mark’s waist and said to him, “Mark, look at what you did. You pushed Amy down and hurt her. Look at her tears and the sad expression on her face.” (I describe what followed in the next section.)

**Expect accountability.** If children’s wrongdoing was deliberate and they know it was inappropriate, the teacher can express disappointment while also expecting them to be accountable. It is important to guide children in repairing

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the wrong as best they can, offering help as needed. After emphasizing to Mark the consequences of his actions, I asked Amy, “Is it okay with you if Mark gets a washcloth 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. I never insisted on a phony “I’m sorry.” Instead, Mark had the opportunity to be accountable for what he did.

If Mark had refused to help, he could have watched a teacher provide the assistance. If Amy did not want Mark’s help, I could have emphasized to Mark that her rejection was another consequence of what he had done.

Later in the day, after everyone settled down, we talked to Mark and Amy about what happened, how it could have been prevented, and how they might act in the future. It’s best to avoid asking young children “why” questions, because such questions put children on the defensive and expect them to reason beyond their years.

## Conclusion

Much of what we do as teachers of young children is an act of faith. We know that the most important things in children’s lives are difficult to measure. We may not see the long-term impact of what we do. Our contributions are combined with those of families and of all the teachers who went before and will follow after us. Even so, we are a part of children’s lives in the early years, 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.

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