

KOHLBERG'S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987). His early research was in the area of differences in children's reasoning about moral dilemmas, and this led to a successful career. His work was best known for the influence it had on our understanding of the way children (up through adolescence) think about moral issues. His model of moral development described three distinct levels, and within each of these levels there are two stages.

Kohlberg developed a series of scenarios to determine how children solve moral dilemmas. The child is presented with the dilemma and then asked how he or she would solve it or what action he or she would take. These responses and actions were then judged and categorized, leading to Kohlberg's three-level model.

The three levels are preconventional morality, conventional morality, and postconventional morality. Brief descriptions of these levels as well as the stages within them are given in the following sections.

LEVEL 1: PRECONVENTIONAL MORALITY (EARLY-TO-MIDDLE CHILDHOOD)

At the preconventional level, children make moral judgments solely on the basis of anticipated punishments and rewards—a good or right act is one that is rewarded, while a bad or wrong act is one that is punished. Within this first level are the first two stages of moral development.

Stage 1. Morality focuses on the power and possessions of those in authority and on the necessity for the weak to please the strong in order to avoid punishment. A child does or does not act in order to avoid displeasing those who have power over him or her.

Stage 2. Morality focuses on the pleasure motive. A child does what he or she wants in order to get what he or she wants from others. There is a sense of fair exchange based on purely pragmatic values and of noninterference in the affairs or values of others.

LEVEL II: CONVENTIONAL MORALITY (MIDDLE-TO-LATE CHILDHOOD)

At the conventional level, right behavior is that which is accepted, approved, and praised by other people who are seen as being in positions of authority. Children seek to avoid guilt by behaving in ways that will be

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approved by the social conventions of their culture. This is broken down into stages 3 and 4 of moral development.

Stage 3. Morality focuses on the approval of those immediately involved in judging one's behavior. Justice at this stage is seen as reciprocity of equality between individuals.

Stage 4. Morality has been called "law and order" morality. The focus is on obeying the rules for their own sake. Justice is seen as the reciprocity between each individual and the social system. Societal order is very important in making judgments at this stage.

LEVEL III: POSTCONVENTIONAL (ADOLESCENCE)

At the postconventional level, people make choices on the basis of principles that they have thought through, accepted, and internalized. Right behavior is the behavior that conforms to these principles, regardless of intermediate social praise or blame. This is broken down into stages 5 and 6 of moral development.

Stage 5. Morality focuses on the social contract and the basic human rights that do not need to be earned. The "law and order" emphasis of stage 4 gives way to a concern for the creation of good laws, which are laws that will maximize the welfare of the individual.

Stage 6. Morality rests upon individual conscience. Right behavior is a product of feeling or being right with oneself; people can obey the law and still feel guilty if they violated their own principles. The rights of humanity, independent of rules of civil society, are acknowledged, and human beings are seen as ends in themselves. At this stage, the individual has achieved the capacity for principled reasoning and it is thus morally mature.

While a major criticism of Kohlberg's work has been its focus on mainly male participants, it has provided a foundation for many other explorations into the moral development of children and adults.

Reference: Salkind, N. J., (2005). Attention. In. Lee, S. W. (Ed.). Encyclopedia of School Psychology (pp. 279-280). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.