

## Reflection on Children's Moral Development

Take a minute to think quietly about what you believe is the greatest challenge in raising your children to lead a moral, Christian life. Then ask yourself: How can we meet this challenge in our family? What can I do about this challenge? What changes would our family have to make in our routines or lifestyle? Write a few possible solutions on paper. You might circle one solution that particularly stands out to you as necessary and doable. Then pray to the Holy Spirit to guide you in helping to implement this solution.

Understanding certain aspects of moral development can be very helpful in preparing children for the Christian life and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The following definitions provide background for understanding what moral development is:

- **Ethics** concerns conscience and character. The kind of people we are and the principles that guide us are a major determinant of how we act and how well we are able to appreciate the Gospel message. Children can often sense the character of adults and will imitate what they see in their parents and other grownups. This awareness of adult values is a key to the development of conscience in children.
- **Morals** concern our everyday choices. Over time, people who live by good ethical principles generally make good moral decisions. In a given situation, however, people may act against their conscience for a temporary desirable objective. These wrong choices lead to sinful behavior.
- **Virtue** is the habit of doing good. The more experience a child has in making the right choices under the guidance of a parent, the more likely the child is to make the right choices in the future independent of adult guidance.
- **Moral laws or precepts** are standards that guide behavior. Ideally, civil laws exist to establish and keep good order in society and to protect the rights of individuals and groups such as families. Religious laws come down to us through our faith tradition and are part of the nature of God's creation, also known as "natural law." God's Laws are not arbitrary; God calls us to live up to our created goodness and to the gospel values that Christ preached.

Growth in moral understanding for children is not, then, merely a matter of rules and laws. As children grow through the primary years, parents and other adults should keep the following principles in mind:

- Always be aware of what adult behavior children are exposed to.
- Explain as clearly as possible the reasons behind family and societal rules. "Because I said so" becomes inadequate for children in primary grades and older.
- Do not demean children when you need to correct their behavior. "You've done something very wrong here!" or "That was a really poor choice" are better responses than "You're a bad person!" or "You've been bad!"



- Try to be objective. The issue is not how the adult feels about a child's behavior, but how the child feels and what the child understands about the implications or consequences of an act. Encourage the development of empathy and compassion: "How would you feel if someone did that to you?"
- Parents should be on the same page with each other and agree on family rules and values. Children naturally will challenge authority, but this does not mean that they plan to make poor choices. Time spent discussing together is preferable to time spent in discipline.
- Never allow children to feel that they have lost their parents' love.

