

Moral Development and Behavior:
Comparing Fairness, Empathy, and Honesty in Children vs. Adolescents

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Introduction to Psychology, Section 52453

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September 30, 2025

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From cutting in the lunch line in elementary school to filibusters on Capitol Hill, questions of fairness, empathy, and honesty appear at every stage of life. These fragile moral judgments shape how children interact with peers and how adults govern nations, revealing how impactful these developmental roots can actually be. Psychologists have long studied how one's moral reasoning evolves. Early theorists like Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg proposed that children begin with a firm, rule-bound approach to what is considered right and wrong; as they transition into adulthood, their moral code starts to evolve into a more flexible, principle-based approach. While this developmental shift started as a theory, researchers have demonstrated concrete changes in how children and adolescents respond to issues of fairness, how deeply they empathize with others, and the ways they use or avoid deception. By examining fairness, empathy, and honesty, this paper will highlight the differences in moral behavior across childhood and adolescence, connecting them to the broader frameworks of moral development.

Understanding the differences in moral behavior between children and adolescents requires grounding in the major theories of moral development. Early on, psychologists were interested in how young people came to understand fairness, empathy, and honesty. Two of the most influential frameworks were developed by Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget; both of their work highlights the progressive nature of moral reasoning as children mature. Their work is the foundation for modern research, which now incorporates cognitive neuroscience and social learning perspectives.

It's interesting how much can change in elementary school. Jean Piaget's theory of moral development emphasizes the shift from heteronomous to autonomous morality. In early

childhood, Piaget argued, children perceive moral rules as fixed and absolute, handed down by authority figures like their parents or teachers. Let's imagine this situation through an elementary school recess: two children are arguing because one accidentally kicked the ball out of bounds. A kindergartener might argue that the "rule" means the offender is automatically out, regardless of whether it was intentional. In contrast, a fifth grader is more likely to weigh in on the intent, recognizing that accidents should be treated differently from purposeful violations. This simple difference illustrates the larger picture Piaget presents: as children mature, they move from rigid, consequence-based reasoning to a more flexible moral understanding that takes context and intention into account (Paulus, 2014).

As children grow older, their reasoning expands beyond Piaget's framework and then begins to align with Kohlberg's stages. Lawrence Kohlberg outlines a progression from pre-conventional to conventional morality, with puberty marking a critical shift in how rules and social expectations are understood. You can think of the pre-conventional level from the point of view of a younger child, where moral decisions are based on avoiding punishments and seeking rewards. Consider a classroom example: if a teacher leaves the room and warns the class not to talk, a child at this stage usually sits in silence to avoid getting in trouble. Once you hit middle school, as you can imagine, the silence gets interrupted by tweens and class clowns. These adolescents transition into the conventional stage, where the silence during a teacher's absence changes to be motivated by respect for a teacher's authority or desire to follow group norms. This conventional morality varies much more, since one student may chase social approval and prioritize that above respect for their teacher. In this way, Kohlberg's stages show how adolescents' moral reasoning expands beyond self-interest to incorporate social approval and relationship maintenance (Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2011).

Piaget and Kohlberg laid the foundation for moral development theory, but now modern research has added nuance. Elliot Turiel's social domain theory suggests that children differentiate between moral rules (e.g., "don't hurt people") and social conventions (e.g., "raise your hand before speaking") much earlier than Piaget believed. To fully picture this, imagine a middle school group project. For some reason, a student decides they don't want to contribute, the rest of the group is now arguing whether it's "bad teamwork", a social convention, or "unfair to the others", a moral violation. This ability to separate different types of rules illustrates the journey adolescents take to refine their moral reasoning as they balance both fairness and social responsibility. In addition, recent neuroscience research shows that brain development may play a larger role than we think. The prefrontal cortex, which is in charge of one's perspective and self-control, continues to mature throughout adolescence. While maturing, it also strengthens its connections with the amygdala, the brain region that regulates emotions. These neural changes allow adolescents to experience more well-rounded and complex emotions, which guide their behavior in group settings (Padilla-Walker, Carlo, & Memmott-Elison, 2018; Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Emotions like guilt, empathy, and pride get stirred into a melting pot of puberty, which is why so many adolescents make inconsistent moral decisions. These modern perspectives highlight that moral development isn't as black and white as rule-following, but about integrating emotions, cognition, and social understanding in increasingly sophisticated ways.

What is fair in today's world? Is it equality? Is it equity? These are questions that humans are still debating and have yet to come to a consensus on. Fairness is one of the earliest moral concepts children grapple with, yet its meaning changes significantly as they mature. Young children often equate fairness with strict equality, where everyone should receive the same amount regardless. This perfectly demonstrates Piaget's theory of heteronomous morality, where

context doesn't matter rules are viewed as absolute. Paulus (2014) found that younger children in resource allocation tasks typically favored equal splits, even when others needed it more. The easiest way to think about this is goldfish crackers; typically, a kindergartener will split their goldfish exactly evenly among their friends. While it's just a simple decision to them, these small actions suggest that decisions in early childhood are less about justice and more about pure equality.

Now, as children transition into adolescence, fairness reasoning becomes more sophisticated. Rather than focusing on pure equality, they begin to consider equity: should these resources be distributed based on effort, need, or merit? Loke, Heyman, Itakura, and Toriyama (2011) demonstrated this shift in the cross-cultural study of sharing and giving. They found that adolescents were more likely than younger children to differentiate how much they shared depending on the recipient's relationship to them, giving more to friends than to strangers. This pattern shows the growth from strict equality to a more flexible fairness system, where context and social bonds matter. While it may not always be morally right, adolescents' reasoning here aligns with Kohlberg's conventional stage, where relationships and social norms guide decision-making.

When it comes to fairness, adolescence can mark the first time humans are willing to lose out for themselves to create a just outcome. Eichengreen, Dammeyer, and Shields (2019) add another layer to fairness reasoning by showing how early adolescents are less selfish as they get past puberty. In their study, groups with and without hearing loss were asked to make decisions about fair distributions. They found that early adolescents were more likely to favor equity-based solutions, even when it meant sacrificing their own benefit. The willingness to accept less to

create a fairer overall outcome reflects a growing moral awareness that goes beyond one's self-interest.

Together, these findings point to a clear developmental shift in how fairness is understood. For younger children, it's always "If they have that, then I should too," but by adolescence, it becomes a more flexible concept, taking others' needs into account. This transition is built upon Piaget's idea of moral autonomy and Kohlberg's conventional morality, diving deeper into the role of fairness in moral development.

Fairness is about how resources are divided, but empathy is about how feelings are shared. From the moment children first comfort a crying friend to the more complex perspectives teenagers have to learn before signing up for Hinge, empathy reflects a key part of moral development. Just like fairness, empathy is expressed differently throughout one's childhood. Younger children often respond to others' distress quickly and emotionally, while adolescents gradually develop the ability to place themselves in someone's shoes, even when someone doesn't express their emotions outwardly.

In their article about adolescent empathy growth, Padilla-Walker, Carlo, and Memmott-Elison (2018) highlight that the teenage years are essential for empathy development. Their argument is that as teens are exposed to more diverse social settings and relationships, they learn to step outside their own perspective. This shift from strictly emotional empathy to a more well-rounded cognitive empathy helps explain why adolescents are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors such as volunteering or standing up for a peer. For example, an elementary-schooler might go comfort a friend who is visibly upset, but a high-schooler will learn to recognize when a peer is silently struggling with stress and offer support without being

prompted. These more advanced forms of empathy depend not only on social learning, but also on the neurological changes in young adults as they mature.

Family relationships play a major role in how empathy develops, especially during the transition into adulthood. Yeh and Lempers (2004) examined the reasons why girls grow up with more empathy compared to boys in their early adolescence. Their study suggests that close relationships give adolescents practice in negotiating conflict, especially when it comes to people with differing perspectives. Think of siblings fighting over chores: a younger child is more likely to have a temper tantrum about the unfairness of having to clean up, while a teenager might consider their sibling's point of view and needs. These everyday experiences slowly train adolescents to handle more complex emotional and moral situations outside of home.

Empathy isn't a static thing; it grows alongside cognitive and social development. Children rely heavily on their emotional reactions; when their friend cries, they cry too, when their friends smile, they smile too. As they reach adolescence, they begin to interpret more subtle cues and anticipate others' needs. This evolution perfectly demonstrates Piaget's idea that children become less egocentric with age, and with Kohlberg's conventional morality, where adolescents find that maintaining relationships and earning social approval are essential. More importantly, empathy connects to fairness and honesty: the ability to see the world through someone else's perspective is incredibly important and guides almost every decision humans make.

If fairness is about resources and empathy, honesty is about trust. In childhood, lying often reflects a desire to avoid punishment or gain rewards; for example, a kindergartener wanting to win a game and doing anything it takes. Evans, Xu, and Lee (2011) found that younger children lie frequently, but those lies tend to be shallow and easy to spot. Imagine a

second grader telling their teacher, “My dog ate my homework,” when the homework is clearly on their desk. The intent is clear: avoiding punishment. The lack of planning shows that honesty is still not tied to deeper reasoning. As children mature into adolescence, lying doesn’t disappear, but it becomes more strategic. Adolescents may lie to protect a friend's reputation or to fit in with peers. These lies require significantly more cognitive effort and align with teens’ growing ability to balance multiple social goals.

Cheating behaviors show a similar developmental shift. In a study on promises and honesty, Hay and MacDonald (2020) found that adolescents were less likely to cheat on a task if they had previously promised not to. Imagine playing at a family board game night. You have two younger brothers, a high-schooler and a kindergartener. The elementary schooler may try to sneak an extra roll of the dice when no one is watching, while the older brother will stay true to his earlier promise of “playing fair.” This finding suggests that adolescents understand the weight of a social contract, even in trivial situations. Honesty to them is no longer about just avoiding punishment, but about maintaining their loyalty and relationships.

Together, these findings highlight that lying and cheating are not static signs of misbehavior. These are markers of moral development. Children’s dishonesty tends to be impulsive and consequence-driven, while adolescents grow up to consider social reputation and respect. In this way, honesty connects to fairness and empathy, where an adolescent’s ability to consider others’ perspectives and uphold their loyalty makes trust-telling not just a rule, but a responsibility.

Moral development is never simple. Difference in moral development is the root of many of Earth’s largest problems. Through examining fairness, empathy, and honesty, it becomes clear how much changes between childhood and adolescence, and why this growth is so crucial for

humans. From snack-time squabbles to group projects, younger children often see fairness as strict equality, express empathy through emotional reactions, and cheat to avoid punishment. As they grow into adolescents, they bring nuance to their morals: they adjust fairness to fit context, use empathy to anticipate when someone is down, and treat honesty as a code of loyalty. By understanding how these capacities grow, we can better support children and adolescents at home and school. Putting these children in a space to learn with patience in and out of school is just one way to improve our collective moral compass as a society. In seeing the developmental roots of morality, we are reminded that even the debates on Capitol Hill trace back to the lessons learned on the playground.

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