

How Do We Teach Values?

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When and How Are Values Formed?

This is a significant question, and addressing it requires a brief theoretical foundation. It is generally accepted that values begin to develop in early childhood, influenced by both the family and the wider social environment. A number of major theorists have explored the patterns and stages through which moral development takes place.

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development is widely known and remains one of the foundations of modern constructivist pedagogy. Less commonly discussed, however, is his earlier work on children's moral development, especially *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932). Piaget argued that moral development progresses in stages and is closely connected to cognitive growth. He distinguished two main stages: first, roughly between the ages of 5 and 10, when children tend to see rules as fixed, unchangeable, and grounded in absolute authority; and second, after about the age of 10, when they begin to understand rules as agreements that can be discussed, questioned, and evaluated.

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, presented in *Essays on Moral Development* (1981–1984), remains one of the most influential frameworks in psychology. It explains how moral reasoning and value systems evolve over time. Kohlberg argued that moral development is not merely the passive adoption of social norms, but a gradual process through which individuals develop increasingly sophisticated forms of rational moral judgment. According to his theory, people move through distinct stages of moral development, progressing from the pre-conventional level to the conventional level as their moral reasoning matures.

Kohlberg's theory was later expanded by James Rest, most notably in *Postconventional Moral Thinking: A Neo-Kohlbergian Approach* (1999). Rest developed a framework for understanding both moral judgment and moral action, shifting attention to the conditions that enable moral behavior. He identified four key components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral action. According to Rest:

- **Moral sensitivity** is essential for recognizing that a situation involves a moral issue;
- **Moral judgment** involves reflecting on the moral principles relevant to that issue;
- **Moral motivation** means giving priority to a moral choice over personal interest or merely conforming to socially accepted norms.

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Action refers to putting the outcome of one's moral judgment and the decision made into practice.

Together, these four components form a coherent process in which each stage serves as the foundation for the next. Rest's moral judgment framework explains how individuals move toward actions grounded in moral and ethical principles.

Another important figure who built on Lawrence Kohlberg's work is Georg Lind, who redirected attention toward moral competence and its assessment. For Lind, moral development is not only about the values individuals endorse; what matters most is moral competence—the ability to make decisions and act according to one's internal moral principles, even under opposing social pressure. To measure this capacity, Lind developed the Moral Judgment Test, also known as the Moral Competence Test, a quantitative tool designed to assess how consistently individuals apply their moral principles, including when they evaluate arguments with which they personally disagree. Despite the fact that these theories are now well-established, they have not lost their relevance. They share several key features that continue to inform modern pedagogy in practice:

- The formation of a value system is a gradual process, in which each stage provides the necessary foundation for the next;
- Moral development is grounded in cognitive development and education; without them, it remains significantly limited;
- Social relationships are essential to moral development, including play, discussion, and all forms of interaction with parents, peers, teachers, and others;
- For values to be consciously internalized, learners need analysis, reasoning, argumentation, and opportunities to explain their own positions.

Although moral development begins in early childhood, it becomes especially active during adolescence, when individuals begin to search for their identity and develop their own moral outlook (Thompson et al., 2025; Daniel E. et al., 2023; Ahn et al., 2022). Adolescents spend a substantial part of this period at school; therefore, the school environment, the people within it, and specific academic subjects can play an important role in the acquisition and deepening of values.

It is important to note that virtually every school subject has ethical and social dimensions that connect it closely with real life and contemporary issues. Accordingly, each subject can serve as a meaningful educational context and contribute to the formation of a person's value system.

Which values are fundamental?

As noted in the first part of the article, as individuals progress through stages of consciousness development, they form:

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- **Pragmatic values**, which are important for personal comfort and effectiveness;
- **Instrumental values**, which help individuals achieve social and career-related benefits;
- **Moral values**, which are guided by universal ethics in any situation.

All of these represent necessary stages of development. For this reason, asking which values should take priority is not entirely appropriate: in any given context, each type of value has its own significance. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the development of moral values—and their integration into everyday life—is more important than the development of pragmatic or instrumental values alone. Living in harmony with oneself and with society becomes possible through moral values such as responsibility, respect, care, justice, honesty, empathy, the pursuit of peace, and others.

In the learning process, these values should not be treated simply as “content to be studied.” Rather, they should serve as a meaningful context that enables students to arrive at logical conclusions on their own. It is equally important that values not be presented as direct statements - for example, “Justice is important for everyone!” - but explored through concrete situations that allow students to reach such conclusions independently. Otherwise, any attempt to “teach values” may be perceived as the imposition of an opinion and may even have the opposite effect (Patry et al., 2007).

Methodology of Values Education

The pedagogy of values education brings together both traditional approaches and newer, research-based methods. A number of strategies and theoretical frameworks are used for this purpose.

Below is an overview of the main methods and approaches used in values education, together with brief explanations:

1. **Discussion-based approaches** - These include, first and foremost, the well-known Socratic dialogue, which uses guided questions to lead learners toward reasoned conclusions. They also involve the analysis of real-life cases containing conflicting values, as well as argumentation aimed at resolving moral dilemmas.
2. **Narrative and literature-based approaches** - These involve the use of literary and non-fiction texts to explore ethical issues and analyze human experience. This is a well-established and widely used approach. Stories, biographies, fables, and character analysis are particularly effective for examining values in context.
3. **Approaches based on theories of moral development** - These draw on Kohlberg-style dilemmas and aim to develop moral reasoning. In line with Rest’s four-component model, they seek to strengthen students’ moral sensitivity, encourage reflection on values, promote the prioritization of morally justified decisions, and help students recognize the importance of morally grounded action.

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4. **Reflective journaling** - This involves keeping written reflections based on observations of everyday situations, events, and interpersonal relationships. Such reflections then serve as a basis for discussing personal values, self-awareness, and self-assessment.
5. **Action- and participation-based approaches** - These include voluntary involvement in community activities and participation in social projects. They also involve discussing democratic principles, such as voting rights, fairness, and participation, within the context of classroom or school governance.
6. **Integrated, interdisciplinary, and global approaches** — These mainly include examples of project-based learning focused on peace education, anti-violence activities, intercultural understanding, conflict resolution, and the development of empathy.
7. **VaKE — Values and Knowledge Education** — VaKE is a specific pedagogical approach that aims to support the simultaneous acquisition of subject knowledge and values. It uses moral dilemmas both to foster values development and to promote the construction of knowledge. The approach is grounded in constructivist theories of learning and the principles of moral education.

As can be seen, the approaches and tools available for implementing values education are highly diverse. It is therefore important to understand the specific nature of each approach, make informed choices, and apply them effectively within the context of different academic subjects.

VaKE deserves particular attention as a distinct pedagogical approach aimed at the integrated development of subject knowledge and values. The method is based on constructivist learning theories and principles of moral education. It uses dilemmas as a tool to support both the development of values and the construction of new knowledge.

Within the VaKE framework, teaching is not about presenting values as fixed, ready-made truths, as this can often be perceived as imposing a particular viewpoint and may even have the opposite effect. Instead, VaKE creates a learning environment in which students actively seek knowledge that is meaningful to them, engage with the challenges posed by a dilemma, and reach reasoned conclusions through the analysis of real ethical conflicts and evidence-based argumentation.

In the VaKE process, the teacher maintains the role of facilitator rather than acting as an “all-knowing” judge. This encourages students to search for evidence independently and to recognize the legitimacy of others’ choices. Such an approach makes it possible for any academic subject to become a relevant educational context in which theoretical knowledge is organically connected to the formation of a personal value system.

How Can We Apply the Theoretical Principles of Values Education in Practice?

Values education, therefore, rests on a strong theoretical foundation. It is informed by well-established and widely recognised theories and draws on a variety of pedagogical approaches. Yet the central question remains: how can this theoretical knowledge be translated into classroom practice?• We should use discussion, role play, and dilemma-based learning as forms of instruction. Students should be asked to justify their positions. This requires them to defend their choices while also recognizing that another person's choice may be legitimate as well.

- As teachers, we should avoid assuming the role of judge or all-knowing authority. We should maintain a neutral position and encourage reasoning and discussion. Students should not feel that there is only one “correct” or expected answer they are supposed to give.
- We should not assess the position itself; rather, we should assess the thinking process and the line of reasoning that led the student to that decision.
- We should look for values within the content of every subject, because values are organically connected to all areas of learning. In literature, for example, we can discuss empathy, love, and friendship, among many other values; in history, justice and power; in mathematics, accuracy and responsibility; and in the natural sciences, care for the environment and the importance of protecting health. This list can be extended to any other subject.

All of the approaches outlined above are prerequisites for making school a place where values are formed consciously and thoughtfully, and where the learning process is focused on students' personal and civic development.

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