

## **“That’s Not Fair! Moral Development in the Second Plane”**

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The second plane of development is sometimes called the birth of the social personality. In the Montessorian framework of development, each plane can be considered a rebirth, in which certain aspects of human nature are brought out and undergo critical periods of development. Some very prominent changes are the growth of language and the onset of puberty in the first and third planes of development, respectively. In the second plane of development, there are a number of features undergoing significant growth, and they produce certain psychological characteristics common to this plane.

One very prominent characteristic is moral development. I’d like to focus on this characteristic, because interestingly enough it is also recognized across many different cultures and religions. That is, in law and in many different religions, ancient and modern, there is normally an age when a child is deemed responsible for their actions. It normally happens at the end of what Montessori would call the second plane of development, and sometimes earlier. (So, around 12 or 13) Also, we observe it on an almost daily basis.

The child between the ages of 6 and 12 is constantly working out what is fair and what is not fair, what is right and wrong, and who is and who is not responsible for this or that situation. In fact, many times something happens because of circumstance, or accident, and the child wants to infer that someone was to blame. This is because they are working out their own moral compass, and developing a sense of right and wrong, and developing notions of moral responsibility. Sometimes things which are not moral considerations – like is it right or wrong to wipe my hands this way – become objects of intense moral scrutiny!

The child is learning what it means to interact with other people, and what it means to be responsible for their own actions. As they undergo this developmental process, they will be using their peers and adults as benchmarks. It is therefore important to cultivate in them a willingness to think about moral questions on their own, and

also to act how we say we will act. A child at this age will notice immediately if we say we ought to do one thing, and then we do something else. This also creates confusion as it establishes a disconnect between moral prescriptions and practical actions. Of course, no one is perfect, and it is very hard to try and live up to all of the moral standards we set for ourselves. And in any given situation we may be pulled in any number of directions. Yet, a child at this age is acutely aware of these conflicts, and so they keep the pressure on! This makes it important to do our best in modeling the behavior we want to see, and explaining our actions where appropriate.

We also should try and help the child reason independently, as it is easy for children to go too far in using adults and peers as benchmarks, and not to think through moral questions on their own, which is much harder to do. This poses difficulties for adults as well, as they also need to help the child develop a respect for the wisdom gained through years of experience and tradition, while allowing a space for the child to become their own free and independent moral actor, who can take responsibility for their actions, and question the world around them. If a child is always following an order, or doing what others do, it will be hard for the child to understand when they are responsible for their own actions and to develop their own sense of morality. If I have only a teacher to serve as my conscience, and only a book to serve as my understanding, then I do not have the chance to develop my own abilities in these domains.

It is of course important to guide them in these areas, but it is also very important to give them the space necessary to work out social conflicts on their own, while keeping a close eye in case one has to step in to prevent emotional or physical injury.

This is also why, at around six years old, children become very interested in fairy tales, science fiction, and stories about good and evil. Moral dramas appeal to the developmental process they are undergoing at this age. And many times, when thinking about these stories, or when involved in a conflict, the moral dilemmas the child

poses will not have easy answers. Adults themselves are still working many of these problems out. It is ok if we don't have all the answers, and it's important to let them know about the complexities of moral decisions by asking the child questions, and getting them to think about their own moral reasoning. By posing questions instead of immediately giving answers, we help the child think through moral problems independently. This will further inculcate a desire to learn and to discover, and more importantly it will help them become comfortable with conflict resolution among peers in situations without easy answers.

And so, although this age can be a frustrating age at times, as it is rife with social conflicts, complaints, protests, and reports of unfairness, it is important to view these actions as a process of development, and as necessary growth pains in the child's life. It doesn't mean that the child isn't listening, or that we aren't making ourselves clear, or that they don't understand the feelings of others, it means that the child is repeating these behaviors to gain a better understanding of them, often unconsciously, as they grapple with the nature of right and wrong. So, the next time your child yells, "That's not fair!" try taking it as an opportunity to question them about why they think that.