

Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill. 1948.

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The book studies the development of moral reasoning in children from the age of 6-7 through age 12-13 or the beginning of puberty. Piaget essentially finds that the 6 year old has a morality based on obedience and idealization of authority. The adult is always right and children should be punished if they disobey. At this stage, the child views punishment as expiation, not as either teaching or explanation.

With older children, moral reasoning changes. As the child learns to cooperate with other children, he begins to question the justice of authority. He becomes less aggressive in his punishments. He judges in terms of motive and not merely the results of actions (what Piaget calls "moral realism" when intentions are not relevant.) He shows solidarity with others as opposed to the adult authority, a solidarity which becomes very strong by age 12. The older child considers explanations will teach a child to behave more than will punishments. He is more concerned with kindness. His punishments are based on reciprocity.

At the level of the eldest children (age 12), a legalistic sense of justice develops and the principle of equity as distinct from equality enters. People should be judged in terms of their different needs and characteristics. One should not expect as much from a little child as from an older child, etc. The older children are concerned with rules, and they become very legalistic in the kinds of punishments they favor. It is important to them that each person get exactly what he deserves.

Piaget often alludes to the development of ideas about punishment, vengeance, and justice. Copies of these pages are included. In general, he considers that there is an innate tendency for revenge in the child (for hitting back when hurt) but also an innate empathy for others. By age 6, the child is more aggressive and severe in his outlook because he is subjected to adult constraint. In other words, by nature he is both aggressive and loving, but adult constraint makes him become more aggressive (Note: We might explain this by the fact that the adult makes the young child feel powerless and he compensates for this by his aggressiveness and identification with the power and rightness of the adult). As the child comes to interact with other children, he begins to free himself from his dependence on adult authority and to become



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both less egocentric and more concerned about reciprocity or fairness. He also becomes more concerned about others' feelings and he considers punishment as unkind to the child and less likely to change his behavior than explanation.

For Piaget, egocentricity and the aggressiveness of the 6 year old are "secondary growths." The primary tendency is for reciprocal affection and for "good" (see page 173), but adult constraint forces the child to prefer duty to good. Only the child who frees himself from adult constraint through cooperation with other children can achieve a non-authoritarian, non-vindictive relatedness to others.

