

7 Deadly Myths About Raising Moral Kids

by Michele Borba, Ed.D.

Parents are their kids' most powerful moral instructors, but often don't use their influence due to misconceptions.

MYTH 1:

Moral intelligence develops naturally.

One thing is certain: kids aren't born with moral intelligence. Moral IQ is learned! The best school for learning the critical habits of solid character is always in the home. Too often parents assume these habits develop naturally: and it's a major misconception. To ensure kids acquire strong moral habits and beliefs, parents must intentionally model, reinforce, and teach the virtues and habits comprising Moral IQ. Unless they do, chances are their kids won't acquire them, and they'll be left morally defenseless.

MYTH 2:

How kids turn out is all in the genes.

Most of us would agree there are some "givens" we can't change about our kids, such as their genetic makeup and their innate temperament. But even those are not etched in stone. Research verifies it. One 12-year study of 72-pairs of genetically related adolescents found their biological tendencies could be either encouraged or stifled depending on how their parents responded to them. The bottom line: biology is not destiny if parents realize that a good deal of how kids turn out rests in how they treat their kids. If kids are treated morally and deliberately taught moral skills and beliefs, researchers say chances are high they will become moral. But the first critical step is for parents to realize they do make a difference in how their kids turn out.

MYTH 3:

Moral beliefs are set by early teens.

Research confirms moral growth is an ongoing process that will span the course of our children's lifetimes. In fact, current studies say the part of the brain where conscience is formed isn't fully developed in males until 21 years of age. The adolescent years are when kids need adult guidance about tough moral choices most. So moral-building endeavors must be continuous and not stop during those teen years when parents often erroneously believe their kids' moral growth has stopped.

MYTH 4:

Peers influence kids' morals more than parents do.

Scores of studies-including ones by the American Academy of Pediatrics-report that while peers do have a huge moral influence, parents influence their kids on moral issues that matter most such as religion, education, and values. Peers influence deals more with daily issues such kids' entertainment, music, and dress choices. Parents must recognize they can still have the inside track in their children's moral development because they can have the closest relationship, if they chose to nurture it. The bottom line: peers will be a bigger moral influence if parents allow them to be. And today's parents can't afford to make that mistake.

MYTH 5:

Intelligent kids turn out morally intelligent.

Intelligence does not guarantee moral behavior. If you need proof just think of brilliant leaders-such as Hitler, Stalin, Lenin-who were also evil. If parents are to succeed in raising moral children they must help their kids not only think morally but also act morally. And that means they must deliberately teach their kids critical Moral IQ skills such as resolving conflicts, empathizing, managing anger, negotiating fairly, using self control, etc. We've always known that the true measure of character rests in our actions-not in mere thoughts. Unless children know how to act right, their moral development is defective. And that knowledge rests not in their IQ score but in what they've been taught.

MYTH 6:

Moral growth starts at school age.

A common mistake parents make is waiting until their kids are 6 or 7-the so-called Age of Reason-to build their moral IQ. By then poor moral habits have formed and are so much harder to break. The fact is parents can start enhancing kids' moral growth when they are toddlers. Although at that age they certainly don't have the cognitive capacities to handle complex moral reasoning, that's when the rudiments of moral habits-such as exercising self-control, being fair, showing respect, sharing, and empathizing-are first acquired. So the earlier parents begin cultivating their kids' moral capabilities the better the chance they have of raising good moral beings.

MYTH 7:

Previous generations didn't build kids Moral IQ, so parents today shouldn't have to.

Today's kids are being raised in a much more morally toxic atmosphere than previous generations for two reasons. First, a number of critical social factors that nurture moral character are slowly disintegrating: adult supervision, models of moral behavior, spiritual or religious training, meaningful adult relationships, personalized schools, clear national values, community support, stability, and adequate parents. Second, our kids are being steadily bombarded with outside messages that go against the values we are trying to instill. Both factors make it much harder for parents to raise moral kids. Today's parents can no longer sit back and assume their kids become decent human beings. Deliberately teaching the moral virtues and habits that make-up strong Moral IQ is the best assurance parents have that their kids will lead moral lives. Their first step is dispelling seven deadly myths so their kids do turn out moral.

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