

Education and Moral Development in Children

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Abstract

The author suggests that partly as a result of the controversy over the teaching of religion, schools have avoided teaching children about moral and ethical standards for behavior. Instead, children have been taught that morality is relative and is determined by the cultural, racial, or ethnic group to which people belong. We teach a "moral pluralism" that assumes conflicting moral codes can coexist. We are, however, living in an increasingly interdependent world in which we need a universal moral code to govern our interactions. We are caught between the imperative to function as a world culture and a belief that we need to maintain separate racial, cultural, and ethnic identities. The author calls for teaching children about their spiritual identity, defined by their divine qualities and talents, rather than an identity based on characteristics of race, social class, religious background, and ethnicity. She presents strategies that parents and teachers can use to help children develop an identity with all human beings and a common moral code that can be applied to all behavior.

Résumé

Selon l'auteur, en raison, du moins partiellement, de la controverse qui a dominé la question de l'instruction religieuse, les écoles se sont abstenues d'enseigner aux enfants des principes de comportement fondés sur la morale et la déontologie. Au lieu de cela, on a enseigné aux enfants que la morale est relative et qu'elle est déterminée par l'appartenance culturelle, raciale ou ethnique. En d'autres termes, nous enseignons une sorte de "pluralisme moral" qui suppose que des codes moraux contradictoires peuvent coexister. Nous vivons toutefois dans un monde dominé par une interdépendance grandissante, un monde au sein duquel un code moral universel apte à gérer nos rapports est devenu indispensable. Nous sommes pris entre la nécessité d'opérer en tant que culture de dimension mondiale et la conviction que nous devons à tout prix préserver des identités raciales, culturelles et ethniques distinctes. L'auteur invite à la création d'un enseignement qui viserait à mettre l'enfant en contact avec son identité spirituelle, elle-même fondée sur des qualités et des talents d'origine divine, plutôt qu'avec une identité fondée sur des caractéristiques de race, de classe sociale, d'appartenance religieuse ou ethnique. Les stratégies proposées par l'auteur peuvent être mises en pratique aussi bien par les parents que par les éducateurs pour amener l'enfant à développer une identité avec l'humanité entière, ainsi qu'un code moral commun pouvant s'appliquer à toute conduite.

Resúmen

La autora sugiere que en cierta forma, como resultado de la controversia sobre la enseñanza religiosa, las escuelas han evitado enseñar a los niños/niñas sobre las normas de comportamiento morales y éticos. En su lugar, se les ha enseñado a los niños/niñas que la moralidad es relativa y está determinada por el grupo cultural, racial o étnico al cual la persona pertenece. Enseñamos un "pluralismo moral" que asume que pueden coexistir códigos morales que están en conflicto. Estamos, sin embargo, viviendo en un mundo de creciente interdependencia en el cual necesitamos un código moral universal que gobierne nuestras interacciones. Estamos encajados entre el imperativo de funcionar como una cultura mundial y la creencia de que tenemos que mantener diferentes identidades raciales, culturales y, étnicas. La autora pide que se les enseñe a los niños/niñas sobre sus identidades espirituales, definidas por sus cualidades y talentos divinos, en vez de una identidad basada en características de raza, clase social, fondo religioso y étnicidad. Nos presenta estrategias que padres y maestros pueden usar para ayudar a los niños/niñas a desarrollar una identidad con todos los seres humanos y un código moral común que se pueda aplicar a todo tipo de comportamiento.

The subject of moral development in children has received considerable attention recently in the press. In a two-day period, I heard a report on the National Public Radio of the United States and read two articles [one on the editorial page of the *Washington Post*, and another in *Parade* magazine (September 29, 1985)], all on the subject of moral development in children. The dilemma presented by each of the authors was this: We have invested time, attention, and money on training children to have brilliant scientific minds. Yet, we have neglected to train them to use their talents and skills to make moral decisions about events that will shape the future of civilization. The authors criticized the schools and families for shirking their responsibility to create noble citizens, concerned with the welfare of all, rather than the materialistic individualists advocated in such

books as *Looking Out for Number One*. One of the articles went on to mention that, lamentably, schools in the United States are prohibited from teaching concepts related to religion, the generally accepted arbiter on questions of values and ethics, because of the constitutional separation of Church and State. There are some observers who suggest that our homes and schools have thrown the baby out with the bath water: in our attempt to avoid teaching religion, we have also avoided setting clear standards and teaching moral behavior.

In this paper, I will focus mainly on the effects of education—in the home and the school—on the development of our moral framework. I believe that education has a powerful influence on the development of the moral nature of humankind. However, I also believe that the present course of events in education is preventing us from achieving our potential.

Much of our educational training attempts to assign us an identity that I hope to prove is not one intended for us by our Creator and that creates conflicting moral standards. It is an identity that causes us to look at Russians and Asians, blacks and Hispanics, men and women, doctors and garbage collectors, and to think of them as different, as belonging to a distinct species, as being inherently either superior or inferior. Such an identity can develop in children when they are not exposed to contemporary social problems in their history classes, when their literature classes do not encourage them to grapple with the moral and ethical questions that the characters confront, or when they do not examine the consequences of their own behavior in different social contexts. Because moral and ethical issues raise questions about students' political and religious beliefs, many teachers avoid discussing these issues and instead give attention to less controversial subjects. Instead of struggling with these complex moral questions, parents and teachers often teach children that the characters in history and in literature behave the way they do because they come from a different racial, national, or ethnic group.

The noted psychiatrist Erik Erickson lists the stages through which we pass in the process of developing our identities. The final stage, he says, occurs late in life when we learn to accept ourselves and others, when we cease to look at ourselves as separate and distinct, and when we finally realize that we are part of the whole of humanity (*Identity* 139). It is sad that it generally takes a lifetime for us to learn about our humanness. What are we doing to interfere with the natural process of development?

My thesis in this paper is that to develop moral behavior, we need to have the courage to reverse the current trend—instead of teaching culturally defined identities, we need to teach children about their true identity. I will argue for altering the present course we are following—that of placing obstacles in the path of our children to prevent them from learning about their true identity. I will also present a prescription for parents and educators to follow.

This is not a subject of trivial interest. It has been of profound concern to contemporary societies. Perhaps there is increasing interest in the subject because many parents feel that they have a decreasing level of control over their children's associations and over the influences on their children's behavior and attitudes. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, referring sardonically to the changes in parents' influence on their children's development said, "Children used to be brought up by their parents" (*Two Worlds* 95). Parents appear to have little control over their children's activities at school, their choice of friends, and their choice of television programs. Thus, it is not surprising to hear parents bemoan the fact that they have lost control of their children's development.

And so, when we feel that we have lost control of our children and cannot influence their thinking, we feel helpless about the course of history—that it is out of our hands. It is and will continue to be in the hands of individuals who appear to have no moral fiber, whose decisions seem to be based on motives of greed or fanaticism, not on justice and equity. Our only hope is that our children will make better decisions about world events than we have made. We tell them, "You are the hope of the future. It is your generation that has the potential to change the course of history, to realize world peace. Where we have failed, you *must* succeed."

The desperation we feel is not a momentary hysteria. It is not a temporary reaction to the crises in world events. It reaches to our core, to our sense of equilibrium, to our sense of justice and of right and wrong. We are being bombarded by conflicting notions of morality—of what constitutes good character and good moral behavior. We are told that this conflict is a normal state of affairs. The press, our churches, and our elected government representatives inform us that the current intense political, economic, and military conflicts are but the manifestations of normal relations between governments. We are told that men are merely following their natural animal tendencies and that the anarchy, tyranny, and terrorism are normal behaviors in a world of differing races, cultures, and national loyalties.

Perhaps more than ever in our history, we are confronted daily by events which seem to highlight the different perceptions of moral behavior held by the world's national, cultural, and ethnic groups. Communication has brought international conflicts to our attention in newspapers, and on the television and the radio. We are confronted by events that make us question our moral code. We ask:

- Is there a moral justification for the Palestinians to take hostages in Lebanon to protest the loss of their homeland?
- Is there moral justification for terrorists to hijack planes and ocean liners because they feel that it is the only means at their disposal to make their cause understood by the world?

- Is there moral justification for unemployed and oppressed residents of Britain's ghettos to bum and loot in order to make their voices of despair heard by the government whom they feel allows their oppression to be perpetuated?
- Is there moral justification for permitting neo-Nazi groups in the United States to amass arms and to print and mail hate documents preaching white supremacy?
- Is there moral justification for the United States government to declare its actions temporarily beyond the authority of the World Court, of which it is a member, when a case regarding its actions is being presented?
- Is there moral justification for a 16-year-old girl in Iran, whose only crime was teaching the Bahá'í Faith to children in a Sunday school class, to be executed because she would not renounce her faith?

It is possible, even among those sympathetic with the subject of this paper, that we do not have universal agreement concerning the morality of each of these cases. Perhaps there are some of us who are undecided or who sympathize with the positions of the various sides. Let us ponder this for a moment. Just why is the morality of these cases a subject of debate?

Unlike our forefathers, we are living in a global society where moral behavior is defined by the culture in which we live. What is considered of high moral caliber in one society is deplored in another. In Iran, the young warriors who die for their country at the battlefield are viewed as heroes. In the West, calling young boys to the battlefield is considered an act of barbarism.

We are living in a world culture but trying to maintain our separate identities. Sociologist Orlando Patterson says that it is a struggle against a natural tendency. He writes:

The inward struggle of two great forces underlies the progress of human culture. One pulls us toward the bosom of the group; the other pushes us toward the creation of ourselves as separate and distinct beings ... The really interesting difference between these two forces is that the centrifugal pull of the group is apparently innate, while the struggle for individuality is a force human beings create. (*Ethnic* 13)

The struggle for individuality and the polarization of values and ethics exist because we have lost sight of our true nature and, instead, we have created antagonistic identities for ourselves. With conflicting notions of our nature and identity, come conflicting standards and no common code of ethics. The problems of terrorism, anarchy, and racism occur when societies attempt to apply on a global basis the standards defined by their cultures. We have a clash of opposing voices, each screaming to be heard and to dominate. We cannot live in an interdependent world without a code of ethics that is universally applicable.

Leading authority on child development, Jerome Kagan says, "This state of affairs has led many citizens to accept begrudgingly a philosophy of moral relativism" (*Nature* 118). Anthropologists call such a belief, "cultural relativism." We are called upon to view with tolerance certain behaviors in another culture that we would find unacceptable in our own culture. This appears to be a noble attempt to be tolerant of the values and ethics of societies different from our own. I would argue that there are certain behaviors that *should* be judged in this way, because they do not pose a threat to the rest of humanity (e.g., manners of dress and diet). However, there are behaviors that should *not* be looked upon as merely a manifestation of cultural or moral relativism. I am referring to actions that threaten the life or integrity of citizens, actions such as apartheid in South Africa and denial of adequate medical care to the poor in the United States. We have created a mechanism in the construct of "cultural relativism" that allows us to escape responsibility for supporting and enforcing common standards of behavior—where we desperately need for them to exist.

Situational ethics, a popular concept of the 1960s, gave approval to the notion that one could behave in a manner relative not only to one's culture but also to the particular situation in which one was involved. I do not mean eating with a fork when dining with the French Ambassador and then eating with one's fingers when eating with villagers in Cameroon. What I am referring to is abhorring behavior in one context but condoning it in another. For example, being appalled by the theft of a friend's car but encouraging one's child to cheat on an exam, or taking pens, paper, or envelopes from one's office for personal use. Or, there is a more subtle case: holding to one set of opinions when associating with one group and defending the opposite position when associating with a different group. Or, speaking out on an issue concerning human rights when we are with a sympathetic audience and then remaining silent when we are with unsympathetic individuals who make discriminatory statements about a racial group—when our statements might jeopardize our position in that group. While often considered a sign of highly developed social skills, such chameleon-like behavior creates within us a sense of conflict and of hypocrisy.

Such conflicts as these arise when we do not know who we are, or when we attempt to maintain several identities, believing that it is more important to please others than it is to be true to our own set of values and ethics. And how difficult that must be—to have to "change hats" and to hope that we are not going to meet people from one of our worlds when we are operating in another of our worlds. Many of us have been trained to believe that such chameleon-like behavior provides us with freedom to move easily across many social contexts.

However, what we create is a number of identities that conflict with each other because they do not have a common set of values and ethics as a foundation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the son of the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, alluded to the prison we create for ourselves when we develop many identities. He wrote:

Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life. (*Selections* 76)

Shakespeare also spoke of this conflict in an often quoted statement from Hamlet:

This above all: to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.... (*Hamlet*, Scene III)

But to be true to ourselves, we must know ourselves. The founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh, realizing the dilemmas that we would face today, presented us with the first law for the age in which we are living, the law to know ourselves—to know what we value and what causes each of us to be motivated toward positive behavior. He said:

...that man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty. (*Tablets* 35)

When we come to know ourselves and our character, we are able to establish a standard for our own behavior and morality. This does not mean that for every human being there exists a unique standard of moral behavior. Rather, there is a common foundation for moral behavior among all human beings. Kagan supports the view that all human beings, regardless of their culture, share a common moral code:

Beneath the extraordinary variety in surface behavior and consciously articulated ideals, there is a set of emotional states that form the bases for a limited number of universal moral categories that transcend time and locality. (*Nature* 119)

When we learn about our own nature, we learn about the “set of emotional states” possessed by all human beings.

The subject of human nature is a subject of considerable controversy. For centuries, philosophers and theologians have argued about the characteristics of human nature. Geneticists and psychologists have added their voices to the dispute by arguing about whether or not human nature is inherited or environmentally determined. (In this paper, I will not review the theories about human nature but will, instead, raise questions about our perceptions of our nature and identity.) It is no wonder that many of us are uncertain about our nature and identity.

Think for a moment how you would respond if you were asked, Who are you? What is your nature? What is your identity? What are some of the more generally accepted views of nature and identity? Our *nature* may be viewed as basically good or bad by those of different religious leanings; as competitive, ambitious, self-interested, and hostile by sociobiologists; or as neutral and highly malleable by anthropologists or sociologists.

Our *identity*, however, is generally defined by social factors or accidents of birth over which we have little control. Depending on the conditions of our birth, we may identify ourselves as belonging to the white community or the black community, or the Hispanic, the Jewish, the American, or the Soviet communities. Each of these labels conjures up images within our minds of the attitudes and behaviors of the individuals belonging to these groups. These labels also create barriers between peoples, barriers that Patterson calls a form of neurosis. He said:

In a real sense nationalism is born in the collective anxiety that comes from a too great awareness of one’s separateness vis-à-vis other peoples, and beneath all nationalisms is the acute neurosis which is expressed on the one hand in the fear of being less than others and on the other hand in the compensatory claim of being more than they are. (*Ethnic* 70)

What is so disturbing is that ethnic identifications tend to be limiting. If you are a black, some people assume that you cannot understand how a white feels about an issue. If you are Jewish, some people assume that you cannot understand the plight of the Irish. And, where understanding does not exist, suspicion develops. An ethnic identification assumes an adversarial relationship—there are “we” and “they.” “We” share a common understanding, experience, and history and therefore must be suspicious of “them,” because they do not share our understanding, experience, and history.

Many of those who supported the movement to examine one’s “roots” did not claim to be motivated by a

desire to gain an appreciation of the social contributions of their forbears (Patterson 154). No, it was to gain a much needed sense of self-esteem and a sense of exclusivity. The exclusivity, however, brought with it a sense of one's own group as being superior to all others. When I see car bumper stickers that say, "I'm Polish and proud of it," I have several reactions. I feel uncomfortable by what appears to be a flaunting of one's nationality and a need to set oneself apart from others. I also feel excluded. I think the latter is perhaps the most profound of the feelings. The ethnic group is an exclusive association.

I also feel defined against my will. If you define yourself as Irish, Polish, Ashanti, or black-American, for example, you may be defining me as different from you and as not possessing what you possess. When I am defined as a white, middle class, American woman, it is probably assumed that I have certain values and behave in a certain way. I am stereotyped. The definition is limiting, and none of us wants to be limited. We want to be all-embracing and to be embraced—we want to be part of the whole.

Why are racial, cultural, and ethnic identifications limiting? The racial, cultural, or ethnic identification is one that looks to the past, not to the future. It forces cultures to be static. Cultures are, however, dynamic. They are constantly changing and evolving in response to the events surrounding them and occurring within them. When we emphasize the symbolic characteristics of cultures (e.g., their foods, dress, and music), we are, in effect, asking cultural groups to remain static. We are forcing them to maintain their customs and traditions. It is as if we are freezing them in history, as we want to remember them. It is as if we are making them into museum pieces, not allowing them to change and to be a force for change.

Human beings are not static entities. We are continually changing as we are exposed to new thoughts and experiences. Our interests, talents, and attitudes are continually being molded by external and internal events. Each of us is unique and not limited by ethnic, racial, or national stereotypes. As is everything in the universe, we are in constant movement. Lewontin et al. wrote about this movement:

The universe is unitary but always in change; the phenomena we can see at any instant are parts of processes, processes with histories and futures whose paths are not uniquely determined by their constituent units. Wholes are composed of units whose properties may be described, but the interaction of these units in the construction of the wholes generates complexities that result in products qualitatively different from the component parts.... (*Genes* 11)

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, racial, national, and ethnic differences are an illusion. They are artificial categories that men have created. These distinctions promote misunderstanding rather than unity.

... humanity is one kind, one race and progeny, inhabiting the same globe. In the creative plan there is no racial distinction and separation such as Frenchman, Englishman, American, German, Italian or Spaniard; all belong to one household. These boundaries and distinctions are human and artificial, not natural and original. All mankind are the fruits of one tree, flowers of the same garden, waves of one sea.... the reality is that humanity is one in kind and equal in the creative plan. Therefore, false distinctions of race and native land, which are factors and causes of warfare, must be abandoned. (*Promulgation* 118)

The Bahá'í writings tell us that these identifications are limiting. 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests that the unity of race and country produce inferior fruits, whereas the unity of the species potentially produces unlimited results. He says:

... from the limited unity of race or nationality the results at most are limited. It is like a family living alone and solitary; there are no unlimited or universal outcomes from it.

The unity which is productive of unlimited results is first a unity of mankind which recognizes that all are sheltered beneath the overshadowing glory of the All-Glorious but mankind has hitherto violated it, adhering to sectarian or other limited unities such as racial, patriotic or unity of selfinterests; therefore, no great results have been forthcoming. (*Promulgation* 191)

I have mentioned here briefly the limiting effects of ethnic, racial, and national identifications. I will now discuss what I believe to be man's true nature and identity.

What do we know about human nature? Human beings have a basic need to feel part of the whole, to feel part of our families, to feel unified with our communities and our cultures, and, despite what we are told by almost all of our social institutions, to feel at one with the human race.

We have a universal nature. We are, first and foremost, creatures of God. This is our essence. And it is all inclusive. We are part of the whole, the whole of God's creation. There is a bond that links each of us with all of creation—past, present, and future. Because we are all brothers and sisters, we share in each other's pain and joy. We share in responsibility for each other. We are interdependent. What happens to you will ultimately

affect me.

Bahá'u'lláh tells us about the nobility of human beings and the choice that we have to behave in a noble fashion:

Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. (*Hidden 9*)

We share common roots. Our roots are our spiritual essence, and this essence is shared by all. It was refreshing to hear Louise Leblanc, a native Athabascan Indian, addressing an audience on the subject, "An Indigenous Perspective," when she identified her Indian "roots," not as the traditions and rituals of her forefathers, but as her spiritual essence. She said:

It was not until I became a Bahá'í that I truly came to realize my "Indianness." Not the robes I could put on nor the rituals I could perform. No, my spiritual roots.

Commenting on the relationship between understanding our true identity and the attainment of world unity, representatives of the Bahá'í International Community made this statement to the United Nations General Assembly:

The root principle of unity is, we believe, an understanding of the true identity of a human being. This seems to be the paramount need in the world—the attainment of unity through an awareness of our true reality, our nobility as human beings. This means a reawakened realization of our connection with God... and this can be expressed in a spirit of service to humanity. (*Preparation 4*)

In addition to our essential nobility, we are defined, not by our race, ethnic group, sex, social class, or educational level, but by the qualities of our character. These are the attributes of God that are manifested in our daily behavior. For example, what we know about the Creator—the Unknowable Essence—is that He is Perfection, Beneficence, Kindness, Absolute Sincerity, Strength, among other qualities or attributes. Each of us, as a creation of the Creator, has as our potential to develop these attributes. These are universal attributes of human nature. Whether in the Sudan, in Outer Mongolia, or in Barbados, we all have as our potential and goal to develop the attributes of God, to a greater or lesser degree. Bahá'u'lláh tells us about the attributes reflected in human beings:

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He [God] hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty. (*Gleanings 65*)

In learning about our Creator, we learn about the potential within us. Once we begin to know ourselves, then our task is to use this knowledge about our capacities and our character to serve our fellow human beings. Understanding this will help give a structure and focus to our lives.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explained the relationship between knowledge, training in moral qualities, and service to others. He said that scholarship means more than developing cognitive skills, it means developing our conduct and behavior so that we can use our knowledge for improving the lives of our fellow citizens.

Training in morals and good conduct is far more important than book learning.... The reason for this is that the child who conducts himself well, even though he be ignorant, is of benefit to others.... (*Selections 135-36*)

In the beginning of this paper, I referred to an interview conducted by Susan Stamberg of the United States National Public Radio, with psychologist Burton White, a leading expert on early childhood development, in which she asked him about the federal and state early childhood programs of recent years. Stamberg questioned what she considered to be the extreme attention being given to developing academically precocious children and the minimal attention being given to the moral development of children. She talked of the need for children to be taught universal standards.

I believe that when moral development is rooted in ethnic definitions, then few universal standards can be applied. In the United States, when our children are taught about world cultures, they are generally taught about what separates and makes us different from others (FitzGerald, *America*). They are generally taught about what Patterson calls the "symbols," the religious rites, the dress, the eating habits, and the customs (*Ethnic 95*). Children are rarely taught about the common bonds that link all humanity—the feelings, the expectations, the

hopes, pain, and suffering, or the talents, inventions, and capacities. Our history books focus on the wars fought between peoples. Children are rarely taught about the acts of kindness and the great contributions of every society. They are generally not taught about the attributes of God that define all of us.

When children learn about the common bonds that link them with all others, they can develop a standard of behavior, a behavior that they can apply in all situations. If they are taught that the human being is, by nature, potentially humane, honest, and patient, they will have fewer doubts about the manner in which they should conduct themselves.

If children are taught to identify with their ethnic group, then their sense of responsibility for the welfare of others will probably extend to their ethnic group. If, however, they are taught about the essential oneness of the human family, then their allegiance will extend to the human family. They will have as their objective to

promote the oneness of mankind. The whole object of our lives is bound up with the lives of all human beings; not a personal salvation we are seeking, but a universal one.... (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in Hatcher, *Bahá'í Studies* 29)

We know of the classic studies (Rosenthal, *Pygmalion*) of teachers who were given a class of underachievers but were told that they were dealing with highly intelligent students who were just late bloomers. We know that those teachers, expecting the students to behave in an exceptional fashion, taught the students in an exceptional manner. The children eventually performed as they were expected to perform: they *became* high achievers. When we teach children that they are noble in character, they aspire to be worthy of such an identity. Children who are taught about their nature and that the purpose of their existence is to serve their fellow human beings will have a vision about their future course. They will know what is ethical conduct and what is not.

As I observe school children, I notice how many are confused about their purpose in life and, ultimately, how they should behave. From television and movies, children receive both subtle and overt messages that selective morality is acceptable and that there are certain instances when it is perfectly acceptable to lie, cheat, and murder.

I also observe the children who have been firmly grounded in their true nature and their identity. They appear secure about their own identity. Their major conflicts concern *which* profession they will choose, not *if* they will choose a profession. Their motive in choosing a profession is to use their unique talents and capacities to be of service to humanity.

I have discussed the reasons why teaching children about their nature and true identity is, in fact, teaching them about moral behavior. The questions now remain, how do we effectively train them to behave in a moral fashion? What are some of the techniques that we as parents and educators can employ?

One of the first steps we can take is to examine our own conduct as models. Our speech can reflect our belief in the oneness of the human family. In the course of daily events, there are countless opportunities for us to speak to children about their true nature, their essential nobility, and their potential to develop the attributes of their Creator, and thus to create within themselves "an unshakable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth which all the human sciences confirm" (The Universal House of Justice 28).

We can also teach children to love God. When we love God—that is, the attributes of God—we develop the capacity to recognize those attributes in others. Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, reminded us of the direct relationship between loving God and loving our fellow human beings when he said, "We must love God, and in this state, a general love for all men becomes possible" (*The Bahá'í Life* 18). 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us about the power of love, a power so great that it can erase prejudices:

... there is need of a superior power to overcome human prejudices, a power which nothing in the world of mankind can withstand and which will overshadow the effect of all other forces at work in human conditions. That irresistible power is the love of God. It is my hope and prayer that it may destroy the prejudice of this one point of distinction between you and unite you all permanently under its hallowed protection. (*Promulgation* 68)

Even in situations where we cannot acknowledge the concrete force of the Creator, we can teach children the universal values and standards brought to us by the Creator. One of the most important concepts we can inculcate in children is the knowledge of their citizenship in the world nation. We can seize every opportunity to emphasize our relationship with all of the peoples of the earth.

I have often been surprised in my work as an educator when I have heard children and adults explain that the actions of others are due to their race or nationality. For example, a student in one of my classes said, "Of course he behaved like a savage. He's an Indian, you know." How often do we laugh, although uncomfortably, when such statements are made? These can be, instead, used as opportunities for us to intervene and say, "You know, he behaved that way because his feelings were hurt. All people have hurt feelings sometimes."

Teachers and curriculum developers have opportunities to focus on the similarities among the cultures of

the world, not only on their differences. If we study the patterns within cultures, we become aware that there is more variation in attitudes, interests, and thought within a cultural or ethnic group than there is between these groups (Patterson, *Ethnic* 153). That means that an Israeli Jew, for example, might have more in common, in attitudes, interests, and thought, with individual Palestinian Arabs than he might with individuals within his own cultural group. We know enough about the different costumes, customs, and culinary habits of the different cultures of the world. We need now to emphasize the common attributes of all peoples. "If the points of contact, which are the common properties of humanity, overcome the peculiar points of distinction, unity is assured" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 68).

Speaking of the common bonds among all humanity, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, winner of the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize, said:

I believe that we must become conscious that one is a person, and that a fellow human is as much a person as oneself, and that there is a relationship between ourselves and nature,... the point is to see how to generate this attitude in the schools. Instead of the aggression and violence shown by television series, by the news media, and by many publications, we need to generate a new consciousness of the relationship of all life.... Children learn the history of power as the power of domination and conquest, instead of learning that power is necessary insofar as it is the power of service. (*Fellowship* 9)

I believe that we can control our perceptions of our fellow human beings. It is within our power to change our feelings about others. Prejudices can be unlearned. Referring to our ability to modify our perceptions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "Let them purify their sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being" (*Selections* 1). And he says:

Cleanse ye your eyes, so that ye behold no man as different from yourselves. See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness.... we must be at one with every people.... (*Selections* 24)

One of the most fascinating areas of research is the study of the ability that humans have to modify each other's behavior through the force of example. In the literature, this phenomenon is called "modeling." In his now classic studies, Urie Bronfenbrenner reports that if children see a fictionalized version of some event on television, there is a strong tendency, even without reinforcement, for the children to repeat the action in a later situation (*Two Worlds* 133). We are such impressionable beings. This is why we need to set an example for our children of the kind of behavior we expect and desire in them. Drawing an analogy to the spread of diseases, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about the effect our behavior has on others:

...for as diseases in the world of bodies are extremely contagious, so, in the same way, qualities of spirit and heart are extremely contagious. Education has a universal influence, and the differences caused by it are very great. (*Bahá'í Education* 20)

In setting an example of moral rectitude and praiseworthy conduct, we are called upon to associate with all

people in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.... They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 35-36)

When we develop friendships with people of other races, nationalities, and ethnic groups, we are contributing to the "regeneration of nations."

My mother, a lifelong activist for civil rights for minorities in the United States, had never had a black friend. When it was pointed out to her that she espoused lofty principles but had no friends who were of a racial minority, she sought out members of minority groups and made lasting, close friendships.

When we associate with members of all races, religions, and social classes, aside from deriving great pleasure from such friendships, we demonstrate to our children that our beliefs are not merely intellectual rhetoric but are manifested in our actions.

What profit is there in agreeing that universal friendship is good, and talking of the solidarity of the human race as a grand ideal? Unless these thoughts are translated into the world of action, they are useless.... A man who does great good, and talks not of it, is on the way to perfection. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 16)

Working together also helps us to develop respect for each other. It is axiomatic that if one works with

another person in a productive undertaking, one learns about that person's good qualities. Everyone has at least one good quality and generally a multitude. Through our association, preferably in an activity providing service, we gain an appreciation of that person's attributes. We soon lose sight of the person's physical characteristics—those superficial elements on which our society trains us to focus. We begin to focus on the reality of the individual: his earnest striving to develop the attributes of God.

We can plan children's activities and provide opportunities for them to work together and perform service for others. Bronfenbrenner suggested:

...surely, the most needed innovation in the American classroom is the involvement of pupils in responsible tasks on behalf of others within the classroom, the school, the neighborhood, and the community.... (*Two Worlds* 156).

We can, as my mother did in a segregated city, take our children to associate with children of other races or national groups. My mother drove at least fifty miles on a weekly basis so that my brother and I could associate with Orientals, Hispanics, and blacks. These were significant experiences in my upbringing. However, association alone does not produce positive feelings (Aboud & Skerry, *Ethnic Attitudes* 19). The quality of the association is important in producing constructive feelings rather than in perpetuating prejudices. Activities in which service is the focus will be conducive to creating harmony and friendship.

We can also set high standards for our children. We can, through our example and through our speech, teach them that we expect them to—and believe that they can—attain the highest degree of their capacity.

We can use praise judiciously. An outgrowth of behaviorism, a recent movement in education, advocated the use of “positive reinforcement” or behavior modification as a way to modify children's behavior. Supporters recommended that children be provided with continual praise in order to increase their self-esteem. Even if a child answered incorrectly or performed inadequately, he was praised for the attempt. We have since learned, however, that such indiscriminate praise does not increase children's self-esteem. Children are keenly aware when they are being *manipulated* and when they have not deserved the praise they are receiving. Rather than increasing their sense of accomplishment, they learn that they can be praised for actions that they have not performed. If, however, we focus on the good qualities that each human possesses and praise children for their actions, then they feel that they are receiving honest praise.

It is not sufficient to tell another human being that he is “spiritual” or “wonderful.” All human beings are spiritual and wonderful. Just as we are commanded to come to know ourselves and to know our Creator, we must also know our fellow human beings and train ourselves to recognize the qualities and virtues that they are striving to develop. The result is that we feel a sense of kinship when we recognize these virtues in another person, because they represent the God-given reality of a person, not an artificially created role that one assumes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us, “One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise. When this is done, one can be a friend to the whole human race” (*Selections* 169).

Group solidarity and cooperation can also be encouraged through the use of group praise. Activities can be planned that require all children to participate in order for success to be achieved. Praising all the children in a group for their teamwork creates mutual respect and a sense of comradeship.

Bronfenbrenner suggests ways to structure the school setting so that opportunities are created in which children can learn to consult and cooperate:

Such development need not be left to chance. It can be directly fostered through setting up within the classroom the kinds of social and situational structures in which these processes thrive. This includes such devices as teams, cooperative group competition, organized patterns of mutual help, etc., including the incorporation into such social units of different mixes of race, social class, sex, achievement level, and the like. In short, we must learn to make more effective use of group forces in fostering human development. (*Two Worlds* 155-56)

We can plan our children's activities in the home and in their play so that they are encouraged to cooperate. Rather than encouraging the individualism that is the hallmark of present-day society, we can reverse the trend in our own homes. We can do this by using consultation in our family deliberations. We can help our children perform their chores together. We can even perform these activities with them. We derive a great sense of pleasure when working cooperatively on an activity of work or service. I believe that these activities are “blessed,” because:

“Verily, God loveth those who are working in His path in groups, for they are a solid foundation.”... They will form a great ocean and the real harmony shall overcome and reign in such a manner that all the rules, laws, distinctions and differences of the imaginations of these souls shall disappear and vanish like little

drops and shall be submerged in the ocean of spiritual unity. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 401-2)

When we work with others in a spirit of service, we learn about our true nature and our identity. What better way is there to develop a strong moral fiber and character in the generation that *will* bring peace to humankind.

Perhaps most important, we can struggle daily to gain a spiritual balance within our own lives. This struggle requires daily vigilance. If we are, as Louise Leblanc states, "at war within ourselves," how can we possibly convey to others a message of peace? And how can we convince children of the critical need to devote their energies and resources to its accomplishment? To create a moral, peaceful society where all human beings consider themselves members of one race and one family, we must begin with the individual. We must begin with the development of high moral fiber and strong character. We must begin with ourselves and our children.

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