

Values Parenting in Isolation: The Challenge of Raising an Ethical Child in a Pandemic

April 10, 2021

Samantha Ives

Class of 2023

Fordham School of Professional and Continuing Studies, Organizational Leadership

April 10, 2021

This morning, my six-year-old son lifted the remains of his chocolate Easter bunny out of his Easter basket's detritus and moved to take a bite. I stopped him with a "not at breakfast time," then without missing a beat he put his other hand in the pile of shredded paper Easter grass and pulled out the five-dollar bill a generous neighbor had slipped him over the holiday. "Here, Mom," he said, with the chocolate bunny-half in one hand and the money held out to me. "No, thank you, that's your money," I replied, not understanding. He then very calmly explained, "No. You take the money, and then you'll let me have my chocolate." The matter-of-factness with which my kindergartener engaged in early-morning bribery was baffling to me and has made me question my own ethical teaching over the year in which his sister, father, and I rarely leave each other's company. If we are responsible not only for introducing ethical concepts but modeling and reinforcing those concepts with limited opportunities to apply our own lessons in the world outside our home, how can my little boy learn self-efficacy and build a core of integrity?

The Golden Rule does not apply to six-year-olds. A recent playdate with the young neighbor who shares our bubble ended when she screamed at my son for "smacking her butt," but when asked if he would like it if someone invaded his private space to hit him, he unequivocally answered, "Yes!" As Terrance Tilly writes in *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn't* (2010), "The 'Golden Rule Test' is not about morality but about vision: Whom do we see as 'others' worthy of moral treatment... Whom do we see as beyond the range of the rule?" Tilly invokes Kant's Categorical Imperative to expand on the Golden Rule: can this law or rule be extrapolated to all of humanity without contradiction (pg. 38-39)? As an adult I apply

teleological theories to my children's ethical choices: if a grown-up did that, what would the consequences be? In the case of the conflict between my son and our neighbor I stopped short of invoking sexual assault, but we did discuss how an adult man who hits a woman's body could be arrested; the adult world agrees that hitting and unwelcome touching are punishable by law. This consequentialist theory inspired merely a roll of the eyes. If Kant, Tilley, and the laws of New York State can't impact my child when I fall short, what will?

I expand on consequentialist theories by asking my son which aspect of a consequence he values most. In the words of Linda Trevino and Katherine Nelson, authors of *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk about How to Do It Right*, (2017), "a more effective approach requires some way to 'weight' the harms and benefits [when making a decision] and that means thinking hard about what you value more and less" (p. 41). It is effective to present the people in my son's life as supportive or intolerant of his behavior and to ask him to consider what each of those loved ones would do if they didn't appreciate the way he was acting. This is an effective method for adults as well; Trevino and Nelson introduce this idea as a way to consider stakeholders in consequentialist decision-making. As adults, we have stakeholders who are both known to us and unknown: our co-workers, friends, partners, neighbors, but also, our business's consumers, (in my case) the audience who encounters our art, the people who provide us with our groceries, mail, or services. It's tempting to connect emotionally to the people around us most likely to condone our behavior when we stand on the precipice of a difficult decision; it is more effective to consider the near-strangers who know us just enough to withhold their respect. What would it mean to lose the esteem of people we see each day? Is there a person whose judgment is valued above all others? What would they advise in that difficult decision? This reasoning is occasionally effective, but six-year-olds do not see their own impact on the world

around them. In pandemic isolation, there are fewer adults and other children who are affected by my son's day-to-day decisions. This impacts his self-efficacy in a negative way. I see him feel impotent when he has a desire that the rest of the household does not wish to indulge. I see him deflate when he has an idea that his sister ignores. I see him withdraw from making any decisions at all when he feels that nothing will change based on his input. For one-sixth of his life, he has not only had a dearth of difficult decisions, (on the surface, a positive thing,) he has also had few opportunities to actualize his inspirations; he hasn't had the growth opportunity of failure; he hasn't faced the scrutiny of new friends or new authority figures and had the chance to disappoint them, adjust his ethical reasoning, and win them over again.

My husband, my daughter, and I are poor substitutes for the proverbial village that should be raising this child. In the absence of external influence, I turn to other ethical approaches. Personally, I consider ethical decisions through a deontological lens. By voicing my duties, as I see them, in my day-to-day decisions and how I conduct myself in the face of a public health crisis, I model ethical decision making for my children. This is incredibly effective for my nine-year-old daughter. Her connection to me creates a virtuous cycle: I consider how I would like her to assess her options when faced with a difficult decision, I use that lens to assess my own, she sees my decision making and emulates that in her own life, I watch her decisions and consider how to guide her as she grows. My son, on the other hand, is fiercely independent. He is determined to make his own decisions and does not consider our influence when he is faced with potentially breaking a rule. His deontological capacity is limited; to the extent that he follows rules it is only because they make sense to him on an intellectual level. If he instinctively disagrees with a rule he is not likely to follow it. According to leadership developer Ryo Watanabe, Robert Kagan would say that my son is in the second stage of development, The

Imperial Balance, in which he does not internalize the needs of others but rather recognizes his own inner world and is beholden only to his own desires (“Robert Kegan’s Stage Theory of Adult Development,” n.d.). He has no duty to the external world, and my deontological modeling does not influence him. The pandemic has robbed him of the opportunity, as he moves through his developmental stages, to identify with a person he would like to emulate. He does not play at adult morality the way my daughter does when she performs as the grown-up in their games. I wonder if this is because he does not project himself into a head-of-household role, and I wonder if this is because he has not had the opportunity this year to belong to groups in which he can take that initiative.

I wish this for my son as we emerge from pandemic isolation: I hope he has the opportunity to fail. He is a white, middle-class, male child growing up in one of the wealthiest suburbs in the nation. I recognize that society may not always hold him to account, rather it will be incumbent upon the village we cultivate to develop his moral compass. I wish for him to find fulfilling, sustaining connections as his world opens up, but for him to become the kind of man I wish him to be I hope he has the opportunity to disappoint a mentor or desire a position for which he isn’t suited. I hope he has to prove his own integrity. I may have to extrapolate ethical lessons from the judgment calls his teachers and peers make that confuse or frustrate him. As he grows into a young man I may have to watch him fail, and I won’t congratulate him for shallow victories. I will cheer the perseverance he shows by putting one foot in front of the other; I will cheer the tenacity he shows when he stumbles but perseveres; I will cheer the resilience he shows when he falls again but continues to rise. I will tell him I’m proud of him when he explains that he has to keep moving forward because people depend on him. Because it’s the right thing to do.

Works Cited

- Tilly, Terrence. (2010). *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn't*. Orbis Books.
- Trevino L. K., & Nelson K. A. (2017). *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk about How to Do It Right*. Yuzu. Retrieved from <https://reader.yuzu.com/#/books/9781119298519/>
- Watanabe, Ryosuke. (n.d.) "Robert Kegan's Stage Theory of Adult Development." *Leadership X Adult Development*. Developingleadership.net.
<https://developingleadership.net/robert-kegan> Retrieved April 8, 2021