

## Opportunities for Developing the Moral Sphere of Personality in Children with Intellectual Disability

Oportunidades para desarrollar la esfera moral de la personalidad en niños con discapacidad intelectual

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Vera A. Dubovskaya<sup>1</sup>

Kurgan State University - Russia

vedu2008@yandex.ru

Ludmila S. Dmitrievskih

Yaroslav the Wise National Law University - Russia

luda-607@mail.ru

Alyona N. Ovsyannikova

Kurgan State University - Russia

aluona-90-15@mail.ru

### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes scholarly approaches to the moral development of personality, describes the views of particular authors on this issue from the historical perspective; highlights and defines specific features and structural components of this notion; conducts a comparative analysis of moral development in case of normal ontogenesis and in case of intellectual disability. It also attempts to synthesize the existing scholarly approaches to the methods and conditions for effective moral development of children with intellectual disability in correlations with the structural components. In the main section of the article the authors provide a general overview of the correction methods facilitating moral development, and summarize the results of the experimental research of moral development in children with intellectual disability of the early school age.

**Keywords:** personality of a preschooler, moral values of preschoolers, emotional intelligence, children with intellectual disability.

### RESUMO

Este artículo analiza los enfoques académicos del desarrollo moral de la personalidad, describe las opiniones de autores particulares sobre este tema desde la perspectiva histórica; destaca y define características específicas y componentes estructurales de esta noción; realiza un análisis comparativo del desarrollo moral en caso de ontogénesis normal y en caso de discapacidad intelectual. También intenta sintetizar los enfoques académicos existentes sobre los métodos y condiciones para el desarrollo moral efectivo de los niños con discapacidad intelectual en correlaciones con los componentes estructurales. En la sección principal del artículo, los autores proporcionan una visión general de los métodos de corrección que facilitan el desarrollo moral y resumen los resultados de la investigación experimental del desarrollo moral en niños con discapacidad intelectual en la edad escolar temprana.

**Palabras clave:** personalidad de un preescolar, valores morales de preescolares, inteligencia emocional, niños con discapacidad intelectual.

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. Ph.D. in Pedagogy, Kurgan State University, Russia

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## 1. Introduction

Deep changes in the Russian educational system are directly connected with the historical development of the state.

Rapid changes of our environment do not only manifest in the positive aspects of the scientific and technological progress, but, unfortunately, also have a negative effect.

Together with the development of technologies, prolonging human life and making it incredibly comfortable, and the emergence of radically new opportunities for online education, we have to face the negative aspects of the scientific and technological revolution. It made an impact, primarily, on humans themselves, their consciousness, cognitive sphere, motives and needs. Abundance and diversity of information, socio-psychological and economic problems that a modern individual has to solve, increase the neuroticism in society and significantly influence the physical and emotional health of its' members.

Sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues are deeply concerned with the future of our children. Lack of due attention from parents, complicated relationship between children and adults devoid of trust, disregard of spiritual and moral priorities, imposition of materialistic values and the importance of financial wellbeing at all costs, powerful flow of negativity and violence that dominates mass media at the expense of the educational component – make a little person totally helpless and vulnerable. Not surprisingly, we have to face with selfishness, aggression and lack of empathy in children already on the level of preschool organizations. In teenagehood it manifests in refusal to accept social norms, escaping from real life to the underground communities, proneness to cruelty, violence and suicide. Constant readiness of a child to “defend” himself against social criticism leads to increased aggression and loss of human values (Bozhovich, 2008; Vygotskiy, 2004; Ovcharova, Gizatullina, 2011; Piazhe, 2006; Rubinshtein, 2002).

The conditions of social and personal development changed dramatically when virtual contacts substituted dynamic human interactions. However, only natural communicative situations, changing suddenly and quickly, based on face-to-face communication and requiring attention to both: yourself and the partner – can help children to develop understanding for intentions, feelings of others. It also forms awareness of themselves and their own motives, prepares them for creating a communicative strategy and achieving their goals, develops the capacity to find their focus in linguistic material and choose appropriate instruments of self-expression. What will be the dynamics of personal formation for somebody who lacks the natural developmental environment and has to grow in the incredibly problematic social situation? In the field of psycho-pedagogical education this question is still open.

The situation is even more difficult for children with special educational needs and disabilities. This group includes children with speech, auditory disorders and visual impairment, delayed psychological and mental development and locomotor disorders. Nowadays the group of people with special needs also includes another category: those with emotional-volitional disorders. Mental disorders do not only exist as an independent dysfunction, but often build on the local intellectual, sensory and locomotor pathologies.

Undoubtedly, the abovementioned special needs of children with various pathologies prevent successful integration of the behavioral norms and have a negative impact on their socialization and social adaptation. Primary disorders in children with intellectual disabilities are connected with the dysfunction of cognitive operations and inability to develop a normal social functioning in a due time – which is supposed to give little human an opportunity to grow into a well-integrated personality. If we take it into account, creating methods for developing harmonious, active and communicative people within this social category is highly relevant for the modern society and moral education of children with intellectual disability is becoming one of the ways to develop socially acceptable behavior in them. Moral educations helps to transmit knowledge, believes, feelings, experiences, habits and behaviors running across the whole history of humanity. Human values were collected for centuries, but during the digital age they get dissolved that leads, in its place, to the loss of the “human face” by society and its further disintegration. The task of the modern pedagogy is to preserve, multiply and transmit the moral values to the young generation by using modern, up-to-date technologies.

## 2. Structural Analysis of the Moral Sphere and its Features in Cases of Normal and Pathological Development

Approaching the moral development of personality from the perspective of structural analysis reveals ultimately new ways of solving the problem. The works of Ovcharova R. V. and Gizatullina E. R. provide a deep and multidimensional research. The authors describe the structure comprising three main components: cognitive, emotional and behavioral (2011).

*Cognitive component* includes moral believes, knowledge, opinions, notions, judgements, values and value orientations, self-consciousness. L. N. Antilogova, I. M. Iljicheva, L. I. Bozhovich, V. E. Chudnovskij, S. L. Rubinshtejn, B. S. Bratus', A. I. Titarenko, E. E. Solovcova, T. N. Mal'kovskaya, N. D. Zotov etc. were studying the cognitive component of the moral sphere (Antilogova, 2005; Bozhovich, 2012; Rubinshtein, 2002).

*Emotional component* of the moral sphere includes moral feelings and experiences. This component was researched by S. L. Rubinshtejn, E. P. Il'in, A. G. Kovalev, B. I. Dodonov, A. F. Lazurskij etc. (Rubinshtein, 2002).

*Behavioral component* of the moral sphere includes moral actions, habits, behaviors, relationships. This component was analyzed by S. L. Rubinshtejn, L. I. Bozhovich, V. I. Selivanov, M. S. Nejmark, L. N. Antilogova etc. (Bozhovich, 2012).

Psychologists claim that the ontogenesis of the person's moral sphere happens within the general process of the individual's socialization. Researchers approach the ontogenetic process of the personal moral sphere considering the sequence of stages of the child's moral development. Every age corresponds to a certain understanding level of the moral norms, ways of moral behavior in society, moral qualities of people.

The development of the person's moral sphere is going through the gradually increasing capacity of the individual to

conscious and voluntary self-regulation. This self-regulation influences the norms and ideals, which the individual absorbed. During the early ontogenetic stages, education and control play the leading role in moral development. Later on, the external factors naturally integrate into the inner world of the personality and start to regulate its social behavior from within (Burmenskaya et al., 2010).

In his works Zenkovskij V. V. mentions three consecutive stages during the process of the child's moral development. During the first stage (1 year – 5-6 years old) moral consciousness is mostly influenced by the external environment, including relatives, attitudes and customs that are common for his family. In other words, on this stage moral consciousness functions as a direct evaluation, moral feeling or experience. This is a so-called heteronormative morality. This ontogenetic stage combines the influence of the external environment with intrinsic moral attitudes. Using these attitudes, a child can evaluate his experience from the moral point of view.

During the second stage (5-6 years old – 12-13 years old) there exist both internal and external moral judgements. The moral experience acquired by the child plays a significant role at this stage.

During the second stage (12-13 years old – 16-18 years old) moral consciousness develops in the direction of the “autonomous morality”. The personality is guided by its own feelings, needs and life experience more than by stable general moral laws.

V. V. Zenkovskij claims that moral development is a consequence of the interaction of the innate moral attitudes of the personality and the influence of society.

G. A. Gorckaya, M. I. Volovikova, S. V. Tarasov, L. I. Bozhovich, I. A. Zajceva etc. were studying the moral sphere of children of the early school age. These researchers claim that the formation process of moral and value attitudes in children of the early school age includes the development of understanding and acceptance of the moral norms. Moreover, this process includes the development of the cognitive aspect in understanding of morality of human interactions and relationships, formation of the capacity to evaluate human motives and actions and the possibility of the alternative moral choice and its consequences (Bozhovich, 2008).

Children with intellectual disability develop according to the same laws as their peers with normal intellectual capacities, their life and social experience is also shaped by social relations. As early as in 1930 L. S. Vygotsky was talking about it in his teaching on the complex structure of the defect. Referring to the data from general psychology, he argues that mentally retarded children go through the same developmental phases as the normal children, however, at some age stages their psychological development is significantly different (retarded). Further Vygotsky states that ‘mentally retarded children experience specific developmental difficulties, but they can be taught and developed with specific disciplinary and teaching methods’.

Primary moral behaviors in mentally retarded children are rather primitive, and very often they do not have any skills of moral behavior. While some children are rude and selfish, others are vulnerable and self-conscious about their disability.

Children with special needs experience difficulties dealing with complexity of the moral notions and the contradictions of their application in real life, for them it is difficult to deal with the gap between the moral ideals and their embodiment in behavior and activities. At the same time moral retardedness in children is caused by the disorders in the structure of personality, problems in communicative interactions with the norm, as well as limited or disrupted practical experience.

Students with intellectual disability do not have a big enough storage of moral attitudes and notions to analyze the norms and standards of behavior. They do not realize how they behave in comparison to other people, cannot clearly imagine the consequences of this or another action or give the right assessment to the moral intentions of others. All these often leads to the misconduct and immoral acts (Vygotskiy, 2004).

### **3. Pedagogical Environment for Realization of the Process of the Moral Values Formation in Children with Intellectual Disabilities**

Russia's National Security Concept reflects the ideas and tendencies in moral education, necessary for the development of children of all ages. That is true that in the existing conditions of the spiritual decay and the crisis of human relationship it is very important to create the environment for education and mentorship that would be able to provide successful socialization, fruitful self-actualization and the formation of moral values in children with both, normal psychophysical development and special needs.

The federal state standard in the sphere of public primary education, accepted on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2013, takes into consideration the individual educational needs of different categories of children, including schoolchildren with special health needs and regulates mixed education of healthy children and children with psychophysical dysfunctions. The educational ideas expressed in this document are primarily connected with the need for positive socialization of children, their multifaceted personal development based on cooperation with adults and peers in the areas of activity that are accessible for them.

Among the educational aims of the document we would highlight the requirements for socio-personal, spiritual and moral development of children. These are: the necessity to create good environment for the development of the abilities and creative potential of every child, being in relationship with himself, other children, adults and the world; to unify education and mentorship in one holistic process regulated by spiritual, moral and sociocultural values, social rules and behavioral norms that serve the interests of humanity, family and society; to create a common culture of personal development for children, improve their social, moral, esthetic, intellectual qualities, encourage

initiative, independence and responsibility, form conditions for the learning activity of a child (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation; 2009).

The realization of these and other aims of primary importance already starts in the preschool period. The program includes five educational areas: socio-communicative, cognitive, speech development, artistic and esthetic, physical education – all encouraging the development of personality, motivation and capabilities of schoolchildren in the fields of different activities.

The main educational program of the preschool development announces the following requirements for the psycho-pedagogical conditions of social, personal, spiritual and moral development of the children:

- respect of the adults to the human dignity of children, formation and support of their positive self-esteem, confidence in their opportunities and capabilities;
- building the educational activity around the interaction of adults and children, focused on the interests and abilities of every child and taking into account his social background;
- support of the positive, kind relationships among the children by the adults and encouraging their interaction in different fields;
- support of the initiative and independence of children in the fields specific for them only.

The document also defines compulsory psycho-pedagogical conditions for children with special health needs. Those are the need for diagnostics and correction of the developmental dysfunctions and social disadaptation, application of specific psycho-pedagogical techniques and interaction methods that provide the most effective development and socialization of children.

#### 4. Research Methodology

To confirm the theoretical data we conducted an experiment defining the level of moral development in children of the primary school age with intellectual disabilities. Our program consists of three parts that correspond with the structural components of the personality's moral sphere. The methods we proposed were adjusted in accordance with age and psycho-pedagogical features of the focus group.

##### Part I. The cognitive component research.

The aim of this part is to study specific features and the level of understanding of moral beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and ideas in children of the primary school age with intellectual disability. This part is talking about two methods: "Moral Conversation" (by I. B. Dermanova) and "My Hero" (by I. B. Boguslavskaya, 2002).

##### Part ii. Emotional component research.

The aim of this part is to study the moral relationships, feelings, moral judgement and self-esteem in children of the primary school age with intellectual disability: "Imagine a Story" (by R. R. Kalinina) and "Moral Self-Esteem Diagnostics" (L. N. Kolmogortsev).

##### Part III. Behavioral component research.

This part includes several diagnostic methods: "Who is Right?" (alternative version by G. A. Tsukerman) and "Gloves" (by G. A. Tsukerman).

The calculation of the final result in three diagnostic stages is conducted through summing the collected points.

We have designed the following evaluation system to interpret the results: every method was assessed according to the 5-point system, the maximum score was 30. Based on that, using the method of scientific compilation, we created the quality characteristic of this rating system:

Low level (0-6 points): the child does not have any clear moral orientation. His idea of morality is incompatible with the norm. Emotional reactions are inadequate or absent. The child cannot assess his moral behavior, whether it was right or wrong.

Below average (7-12 points): the moral orienteers are vague. Attitude to the moral values is unstable. The child has a wrong interpretation of behaviors and actions, does not know what to do in this or another situation, asking for advice from the teacher or his peers.

Average (13-18 points): the child is aware of the moral standards but does not aspire to follow them. He gives an adequate assessment to behaviors but his attitude to the moral norms is unstable and passive. His emotional reactions are inadequate. He can make a *correct* moral choice, but it will not always be the *right* one.

Above average (19-24 points): the child has moral orienteers, his assessment of behaviors and emotional reactions are adequate, but his attitude to the moral norms is still quite unstable.

High (25-30 points): the child bases his choice on moral beliefs, his emotional reactions are adequate, his attitude to the moral norms is active and stable. The child is able to explain both: his own moral behavior and the one of other children.

## 5. Moral Sphere in Children of the Primary School Age: Research Results

The complex of the proposed methods helped us to find the typical level of moral development in children of the primary school age with mental disabilities (Figure 1): the group of researchers conducted experiment on the base of the special needs (correction) organizations of Kurgan city. Forty students of the 3-rd grade aged between 10 and 11 diagnosed by the psycho-medico-pedagogical commission with a mild mental retardation.

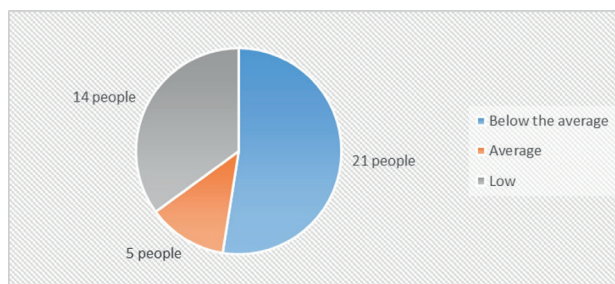


Figure 1. Distribution of the levels of moral development in children with mental disability of the early school age within the focus group

In the part dedicated to the research of the cognitive component we came to conclusion that children do not have any clear idea about expressing moral qualities in social life, their ideas were often too general or wrong. Nevertheless, while using the method “My Hero”, majority of children showed good results: children were enthusiastic to tell the researchers about their role model, and in the majority of cases they were giving a correct explanation of why they chose this or another hero. While using the method “Moral Conversation” we found out that children were facing difficulties defining such notions as: generosity, fairness, kindness.

Researching the emotional component we noticed that the method “Imagine a Story” was the most appealing to children while it had some handout material. Majority of children putting the images in the correct order could not explain why they made such a choice. 21 students showed emotions that were not adequate to the situations on the images. For example, when they saw a picture where somebody is bullying a girl they were laughing. When they were asked about the reason for laughter they said: “Because she is in pain. It is funny”. The results of applying the method “Moral Self-Esteem Diagnostics” revealed an even lower score.

The results of research in the behavioral component showed that the students do not always estimate the meaning of particular situations correctly, have difficulties in the assessment of the conflict situations, either misunderstanding the situation as a whole, or not being able to explain the reasons behind the behavior and mood of people. While using the method “Gloves” we highlighted two groups of children: one was often aggressive and selfish towards their peers, without explaining the reason for their behavior and mood. Children were not aspiring to help each other, often expressing disagreement with the partner’s opinion. The members of the other group, on the opposite, were trying to cooperate, propose their help to others, but these actions were depending on the situation, personal gain and interest. For example, proposing their help, they could say: “I can help you to color it, but you will give me your pencil”.

While studying their moral sphere we have noticed the prevalence of the average and low levels of development, characterized by:

- The main categories of morality, essential for understanding of the child of primary school age, were perceived in a distorted way or totally absent from his perception;
- Such universal human values as kindness, friendship, love are perceived in a superficial manner, accompanied by inability to formulate their own thoughts (“Kindness – is respects other people”);
- The definitions of moral notions lack clarity and transparency: in the majority of the answers, qualities and feelings are substituted by an object or action (“Fairness – is a person who is fair” etc.);
- Verbalization prevails in the answers of schoolchildren: majority of the examples are taken from books, stories of the adults, rather than their own experience; they often use catch phrases;
- Such notions as “fairness” and “responsibility” were the most difficult to define, in general, children refused to define them;
- The beliefs belonging to the moral sphere are rather primitive;
- Schoolchildren cannot explain the meaning of the moral categories;
- They have difficulties defining their emotions in accordance with the highlighted categories;
- They respond in accordance with how they are “expected” – rather than with how they feel;
- Low level of awareness about the moral norms and values;
- Behaviors and actions in different situations start to depend on particular moral beliefs of the child of primary school age;

- Children of primary school age show emotional attitude to the moral norms and prerequisites for the formation of the inner moral motivation;
- When explaining why they love parents – highlight material values and the attitude of parents to them.

Thus, on the level below average there is only a partial understanding of the moral categories, but the schoolchildren are aware that it is necessary to follow the general rules and attitudes. The moral attitudes are realized based on the situation, under the pressure of the external environment. Describing this level, one has to underline that the notion of the moral ideal in this case is correct but incomplete. The existing ideals reflect, to the greater extent, the moral values and socially significant personal qualities. In the everyday life they are inconsistent in pursuing their ideal.

Concerning the low level of development, we underlined that the capacity to define and highlight the moral categories is still not formed. Rules of morality are only accepted by the child in case of the possible reward (personal gain). The idea of the moral ideal, moral values and personal qualities is incomplete and not fully correct. They do not have a personal ideal, but understand the necessity to have moral ideals in life. In some life situations they show moral instability. They do not think about the ideal or have a wrong image of it, revealing contradictive opinions on moral values and personal qualities. Material values dominate their worldview.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the experimental and practical data we can make some conclusions:

Thanks to the numerous research of such authors as L. N. Antilogova, I. M. Il'icheva, L. I. Bozhovich, V. E. Cudnovskij, S. L. Rubinshtejn, E. P. Il'in, A. G. Kovalev, B. I. Dodonov, A. F. Lazurskij, Nejmark etc. some questions on this topic received an explanation and scientific basis, however, the problem of the moral sphere research is still actual (Antilogova, 2005; Bozhovich, 2012; Rubinshtein, 2002);

Spiritual and moral development is a complex psychological construct, including three elements:

1. Cognitive component – moral knowledge, beliefs, notions, attitudes, judgments, values and value orientations;
2. Emotional component – moral feelings and experiences;
3. Behavioral component – moral habits, actions, behaviors, relationships.

The claim that moral sphere of children of primary school age with intellectual disabilities has its own specific features, has a special scientific and theoretical meaning, in particular:

- The idea of moral relationships in children with intellectual disabilities is quite primitive;
- The skills of moral behavior are primitive or absent. Some children exhibit selfishness and rudeness, others are extremely vulnerable and self-conscious about their disability;
- Students with intellectual disability do not have enough moral ideas or mental representations to analyze the norms and rules of behavior.

From our point of view, systematic and complex work aimed at formation of the moral sphere of the personality will make the modern society more “healthy”. Instilling such categories as “kindness”, “love”, “responsibility”, “obedience” will increase the importance of spiritual and moral education in general and in children with intellectual disability in particular.

In course of education that is mostly based on conversation children adopt the basic norms of morality, moral forms and rules of cultured behavior. Being integrated and becoming characteristic features of the child's personality, these rules and norms start to guide his behavior, turning his actions into conscious acts regulated by morality. All these compose the child's individuality and make him a personality, distinct from other children not only in terms of intellect, but also in terms of motivation and morality. The highest level of the child's development at the primary school age includes personal self-consciousness, awareness about his individual features and abilities, about the reasons for his failure or success.

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