

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Developmental Changes and Individual Differences in Young Children's Moral Judgments

Smetana, J. G., Rote, W. M., Jambon, M., Tasopoulos-Chan, M., Villalobos, M., & Comer, J. (2012). Developmental changes and individual differences in young children's moral judgments. *Child Development*, 83(2), 683-696.  
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**SUMMARY:** Children were interviewed three times over the course of a year to explore individual trajectories of change in young children's understanding of different moral criteria. The influence of age, sex, and temperament on moral development was specifically examined. Children's understanding of moral transgressions as wrong (without an authority figure present) increased over time. Greater child extraversion and greater effortful control (a precursor to executive functioning) were associated with a better understanding of the generalizability of morality (knowing morality applies to everyone).

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Significant changes across time were found in young children's moral judgments of authority. Across one year, participants grew in their understanding that moral transgressions were wrong (regardless of whether or not it is witnessed by authority).
- Children whose parents rated them higher in extraversion were more likely to have acquired an understanding that moral transgressions were deserving of punishment at follow-up data collection phases than at baseline.
- Children rated as higher in effortful control (a precursor of executive functioning) had a better understanding that moral transgressions are generalizably wrong at their initial interviews compared to those lower levels of effortful control.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Participate in professional development about moral reasoning in early childhood
- Develop curricula that incorporates lessons on morality for preschool children and their families

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes for parents that teach them how to model moral reasoning and decision making for their children
- Provide workshops that foster reflection about moral issues and urge military children and youth to appreciate the positive benefits of prosocial behavior

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend offering professional development to military family program workers about the cognitive and moral development of children
- Recommend the development of infrastructures of volunteer networks/opportunities for military families as a means of promoting prosocial family activity

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## METHODS

- Children from four daycare centers in a suburb of a northeastern U.S. city were interviewed at Time 1, six months later at Time 2, and one year later at Time 3.
- Interviews with the children consisted of questions about social rules and parents completed an assessment of child temperament.
- Statistical analyses examined the growth trajectories of different moral criteria across one year.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 70 (53% female) children with an average age of 3.39 years (SD = 0.48) at Time 1 data collection.
- Eighty-one percent of children lived in two-parent homes and all parents were college educated.
- In the sample, the racial/ethnic composition of the children is: 83% White, 9% Other, 5% Asian-American. No race/ethnicity data were provided for the parents.

## LIMITATIONS

- The authors selected moral situations (focused on physical and psychological harm) where not much significant change in children's responses occurred. Therefore, the change in their data was limited, but may have had more breadth if they chose situations that were more subtle, like stealing or not sharing.
- The interview questions were limited by children's language abilities and may have been more complicated than some of the young children could have understood.
- The sample was primarily White, civilian, and middle class; the ability to generalize the findings to military families or children is likely limited.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the influence of empathy or other emotional processes on moral transgressions
- Investigate parental discipline to transgressions as sources of variability in children's developing understanding of different moral criteria
- Gather longitudinal data over more than a year and include military families

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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