How Media Content Can Shape Kids' Moral Development

Media content that emphasizes certain moral values can influence how kids prioritize those values.

November 8, 2021 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

Many experts agree that the media influences young people's moral development in both good and bad ways. Now, new study findings published in the Journal of Media Psychology show that for children, reading about moral principles such as care, fairness, loyalty and authority can help shape how much importance they place on each of these, according to a press release from the University at Buffalo.

For the investigation, researchers conducted two related studies. The first inquiry, a pilot study involving verbal prompts, asked 87 sixth graders ages 11 to 13 to choose a word that best and least represented the following moral values: care, fairness, loyalty, and authority. Scientists supplied three sets of four positive words and three sets of four negative words for each of these principles. For example, one set of four positive words included kind, honest, loyal and respectful, while a set of negative words included hurtful, unfair, disloyal or disrespectful.

In another test in this pilot study, researchers placed children in two classrooms and verbally prompted them to select from among the three sets of positive and negative words for the four moral values. The kids in classroom 1 received prompts for "care" and "fairness" values; the youngsters in classroom 2 received prompts for "loyalty" and "authority."

For the second inquiry, scientists created five versions of a comic book for 107 students in grades 5 to 7 who participated in the study. (Each publication emphasized one of the same four values and the fifth showed a lack of morality.) Researchers instructed students to read the comic book silently and then complete a survey to indicate the important moral value shown.

The results of both studies showed that a focus on moral values either verbally or via exposure to these principles in media content increased their importance to kids. Additionally, in the case of reading material—in this study comic books—the moral value was more likely to be perceived as being essential when that principle was showcased as compared to when it was not spotlighted.

"Media can distinctly influence separate moral values and get kids to place more or less importance on those values depending on what is uniquely emphasized in that content," said

Lindsay Hahn, PhD, an assistant professor of communication at the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences and the lead author of the study.

“When parents are considering what media they might want to select for their children, they can take into account what particular moral value is being emphasized by the main character and how the main character is treated because of those actions,” she added.

To learn more about the effects of media on children’s behavior, read “Transformed,” an account of what Evelyn Lozada, of Basketball Wives, experienced when her daughter began to mimic her bad behavior on the raucous reality TV series.

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