

How Children's Thinking Develops

Tip – You will be better able to determine your child's readiness to learn certain values when you understand the development of his or her thinking.

It takes more than a night out serving dinner to the homeless or weekly attendance at religious services to instill values in children. Those activities are valuable, but more is needed.

Harriet Heath, developmental psychologist and author of *Using Your Values to Raise Your Child to Be an Adult You Admire*, advocates using your values to guide your everyday parenting decisions. Everything needs to work together: your daily discipline, your religious activities, service activities, and your work. Fine, you say, but how do I know when my child is ready to learn certain values—and how do I teach them?

Tools – Heath recommends understanding the development of children's thinking before settling on a plan to teach a value. This information can help you understand how a child sees a situation when his behavior does not match your expectations. A brief overview, extracted from *Using Your Values*, is below.

- **Babies/Toddlers** seek to understand and find their way by exploring their world – by tasting, touching, watching, listening, and smelling. They find meaning and understanding by interacting with the people and things around them. Their learning is quite physical. As they move into toddlerhood, they begin to put words to the process – "What's 'at'?" they ask. Babies and toddlers learn values by experiencing them. They learn to trust as their needs are routinely met.



- **Preschoolers** continue to understand their world and their place in it by exploring, by interacting with others, and by using words – constantly asking, "Why?" Typically, preschoolers understand language quite literally. If you call someone a monster, then, to the preschooler, that person is a monster. Preschoolers learn values by living them. If they are taught to take turns with toys, then that is what "sharing" means to them. They assume everyone feels and thinks the same way they do.



- **Elementary school-aged children's** exploration becomes increasingly guided by an abstract system of categories and rules. Words are now abstractions, representing something, but not being the object itself. Rules become increasingly important. These children continue to explore their world with physical action, but now they also use words to describe it, and abstract concepts to organize it. They no longer have to actually live something to know it. Their desire to know is limitless. They can think of many ways to deal with a situation, but may have trouble when certain categories overlap. For example, a girl may have a boy for a friend, at the same time she professes to hate all boys; she thinks of him as a friend, not as a boy.
- **Teenagers** finally have the ability to think abstractly. Thought no longer needs to be tied to object. Categories can overlap, which motivates them to question certain relationships: "Why is it bad to smoke marijuana but okay to take aspirin? Both are drugs and both relieve pain." Part of the teen's search is to question, with increasing insight, the values by which he or she has been raised. Although their thinking is increasingly sophisticated, it is still different from adult's thinking because they have much less experience with life.

You'll find more practical tips you can use right now in *Using Your Values to Raise Your Child to Be an Adult You Admire* by Harriet Heath, Ph.D.