

The Moral “Umbilical Cord” of Human Infants- Reflections on Raising Good Children: Morality and Child Development

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Abstract: Children’s moral education is closely intertwined with the advancement of social order and constitutes a central concern within the field of developmental psychology. In the Chinese context, the unique legacy of the one-child policy, combined with deeply rooted collectivist cultural traditions, has exerted a profound influence on children’s moral development. Against the backdrop of the one-child policy, children-often colloquially labeled as “little emperors”-have had to navigate a complex social environment in which they construct and adapt their own moral frameworks. This raises a critical question worthy of systematic inquiry. In *Raising Good Children: Morality and Child Development*, Xu Jing provides an in-depth examination of the processes through which only children acquired moral understanding during early childhood, prior to the implementation of the “universal two-child” policy in China. The book focuses on the dual impact of the one-child policy and collectivist cultural norms on children’s moral development. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2012 in a middle-class private kindergarten in Pudong, Shanghai, the study closely observed 120 children aged two to six. By integrating naturalistic ethnography with controlled experimental methods, the research foregrounds children’s authentic voices and offers a nuanced analysis of moral development across three interrelated dimensions: moral cognition, moral emotion, and moral behavior. It further reveals the complex tensions between children and caregivers, as well as between children’s cultural worlds and those of adults. The book not only demonstrates methodological interdisciplinarity but also makes a significant contribution to existing scholarship on children’s moral education. From a dialectical and rational perspective, it calls for the cultivation of critical thinking and imaginative empathy in education, as essential means to mitigate and prevent latent moral risks.

1. Introduction

Amid the rapid transformations of contemporary society, the moral landscape of China is undergoing continuous change. Traditional values that once held a dominant position are gradually receding, giving rise to what may be described as a “moral vacuum.” In this context, conventional moral benchmarks are increasingly supplanted by the pursuit of economic gain, individual

achievement, and personal gratification, signaling a significant shift in societal moral orientation. From infancy to early childhood-through stages of babbling, toddling, language acquisition, and the emergence of independent thought-young children are often metaphorically likened to a blank slate awaiting moral inscription. Yet this “blankness” is not passive. Rather, children are endowed with what may be termed a “moral umbilical cord,” which connects them intrinsically to the broader system of social moral values, continuously nourishing and guiding their lifelong development. *Raising Good Children: Morality and Child Development* offers a distinctive perspective and profound insight into this process, providing valuable empirical evidence and theoretical reflection on children’s moral development. Through meticulous observation and analysis of children’s behaviors, psychological processes, and interactions within family, school, and broader social contexts, the book explores the generative logic and developmental trajectories of children’s moral systems. It elucidates how, within complex socio-cultural environments, children gradually construct their own moral understandings and behavioral norms through ongoing interactions with adults. Children are not passive recipients or “containers” of moral instruction; rather, they are autonomous agents endowed with independent thinking and creativity. [1]They actively explore, experiment, err, and learn in their engagement with the world. Their moral frameworks do not emerge instantaneously but are progressively shaped through dynamic interactions with adults, peers, and social environments. This work not only deepens our understanding of the internal mechanisms underlying children’s moral development but also provides valuable implications for educational practice, offering critical guidance on how to more effectively foster children’s moral growth.

2. The Metaphor of the “Moral Umbilical Cord”: A Bond Connecting Children and Society

In biological terms, the umbilical cord serves as a vital conduit linking the fetus to the mother, through which nutrients and oxygen are supplied while metabolic waste is removed. Its existence symbolizes an inseparable connection between fetus and mother, constituting the foundation and point of departure for life. As a metaphor, the “moral umbilical cord” underscores the intrinsic and enduring linkage between children and society, as well as the central role of moral education within this relationship.

The “moral umbilical cord” signifies the moral connection through which children acquire social norms and behavioral expectations, while simultaneously aligning their actions with broader societal standards. Through this process, children gradually internalize moral norms and construct their own moral systems, thereby enhancing their capacity to function within social life. From a constructivist perspective, children are active agents who continuously draw upon environmental inputs to organize and construct their understanding of the world [2].

Lev Vygotsky’s (1980) sociocultural theory emphasizes that children actively transform the adult world by participating in and co-creating culturally shared practices. This process encompasses not only collective interactions in social contexts but also the internalization of these interactions at the individual cognitive level [3]. *Raising Good Children* vividly illustrates this process of moral acquisition: children not only construct personal moral worlds but also embed these moral understandings into everyday practices. This resonates with Lawrence Kohlberg’s (2005) proposition that “children are moral philosophers,” who develop their own frameworks of reasoning based on social experiences, particularly in relation to justice, rights, and equality [4]. Society ultimately constitutes both the destination of children’s moral development and the ultimate objective of moral education. Through ongoing interaction with social environments-shaped by cultural norms, values, and social events-children progressively translate internalized moral concepts into concrete behavior. In this sense, the broader moral climate and cultural traditions of society function as the terminal anchor of the “umbilical cord,” providing children with opportunities to practice and enact morality.

3. The Hidden Concerns of the “Moral Umbilical Cord”: Dilemmas in Children’s Moral Development

3.1 The Emergence of Moral Indifference and Exclusion

Within educational contexts, excessive emphasis by parents and institutions on rigid discipline, academic achievement, and collective honor often inadvertently constrains the development of children’s moral reasoning capacities. When children’s behaviors are mechanically confined within predefined routines, their sensitivity to moral issues may gradually diminish. The pre-structuring of actions reduces the necessity for independent judgment, thereby alleviating the perceived burden of moral decision-making.

Under such conditions, children may become mere executors of institutional expectations. While this may enhance efficiency and compliance, it simultaneously undermines reflective awareness of consequences, weakening the foundations of responsibility. Influenced by instrumental rationality, children may come to perceive their actions as inherently justified, overemphasizing utility and functionality while neglecting broader ethical considerations. Although “good children” often possess strong ideals and clear goals, these very ideals may constrain their capacity for self-reflection. They may struggle to critically assess their own values and, in the process, construct implicit boundaries against so-called “non-idealists” [5].

When interacting with peers who deviate from their standards, such children may fail to appreciate diversity in interests, needs, and dispositions, instead expecting conformity for the sake of collective honor. When such expectations are unmet, exclusionary tendencies may emerge, with others being perceived as obstacles or outsiders. In overvaluing their own aspirations, these children may inadvertently neglect their ethical responsibilities toward others, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities within educational systems and exacerbating social divisions.

3.2 Three Modes of “Chinese-Style” Parenting

As the primary site of early socialization, the family plays a pivotal role in shaping children’s moral development. In a period marked by profound social and moral transformation, the interaction between family and school—the two principal agents of socialization—has become increasingly complex and tension-laden. Parents and educators alike find themselves navigating competing value systems, striving to reconcile idealized educational goals with practical realities.

Three prominent dichotomies characterize contemporary Chinese parenting practices:

First, the tension between “overprotection” and “free-range” parenting. The former establishes strict boundaries to ensure safety and stability, while the latter emphasizes autonomy and exploration. Overprotection may inhibit creativity and independent problem-solving, whereas excessive permissiveness may foster egocentrism and weaken adherence to norms.

Second, the conflict between “authoritarian” and “democratic” parenting. Authoritarian approaches prioritize obedience and authority, potentially suppressing independent thinking, whereas overly democratic approaches may undermine discipline and normative structure. Given children’s sensitivity to parenting styles, it is widely acknowledged that a balance must be struck between authority and respect for children’s autonomy.

Third, the divergence between “tiger parenting” and “nurturing motherhood.” The former emphasizes strict discipline to cultivate desirable behaviors, while the latter prioritizes alignment with children’s natural developmental trajectories [6]. In the context of intensified academic competition, caregivers increasingly integrate diverse parenting philosophies, expanding their focus to include children’s social relationships, psychological well-being, and individual interests, thereby seeking a balanced developmental pathway.

4. Reconnecting the “Moral Umbilical Cord”: Moral Education in Contemporary Society

4.1 The Paradox of Empathy

Empathy-the capacity to understand others’ perspectives-is widely regarded as a cornerstone of human morality and a central topic in psychology. Research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that empathy emerges in infancy and develops progressively. However, children rely on environmental cues to interpret others and society, underscoring the importance of early moral education in fostering empathetic capacities.

The 2011 “Little Yueyue Incident,” in which an injured toddler was ignored by multiple passersby, has often been cited as emblematic of moral decline, intensifying public concern regarding societal ethics. In this context, cultivating empathy in children becomes an urgent priority. Yet empathy education presents a paradox: while empathy mitigates egocentrism-particularly among only children-excessive altruism may disadvantage individuals in competitive social environments [7]. The challenge, therefore, lies in nurturing morally grounded individuals who can also adapt to real-world complexities.

In practice, both families and educational institutions actively promote perspective-taking and prosocial understanding. Children, however, demonstrate sophisticated empathetic competencies, integrating institutional moral instruction with lived social experiences. They exhibit moral awareness and social intelligence that often exceed expectations, highlighting the need to balance empathy cultivation with adaptive competence.

4.2 Ownership and Fairness

Concepts of ownership and fairness constitute foundational elements in children’s reasoning about social exchange and resource distribution. From an early age, children exhibit possessive tendencies, which evolve into a “first possession bias”-the belief that initial contact confers ownership. While traditional narratives such as “Kong Rong yielding pears” are employed to instill moral values, they may inadvertently complicate children’s understanding of equitable distribution.

Empirical observations reveal that children actively engage in constructing ownership norms through interactions involving sharing and exchange, gradually internalizing fairness principles [1]. Over time, they learn to apply both equality-based and merit-based criteria in allocating resources. Equality emphasizes uniform distribution regardless of contribution, whereas merit-based principles consider effort and performance.

Xu Jing’s research integrates these principles into experimental designs, revealing tensions between idealized moral instruction and children’s actual behavior. Notably, children demonstrate agency in constructing their own moral frameworks. For instance, in scenarios involving joint production, older children tend to favor merit-based distribution, whereas younger children rely more on equal division. In real-life contexts, however, children flexibly integrate multiple criteria-including scarcity and cost-while engaging in negotiation processes. This suggests that children’s moral reasoning often transcends simplistic frameworks, reflecting a nuanced understanding of competing claims and the need for deliberative resolution.

4.3 “Chinese-Style” Discipline

The notion of discipline, long embedded in cultural traditions-as reflected in classical texts emphasizing parental responsibility-constitutes a complex arena of value negotiation and power dynamics. Raising Good Children identifies multiple culturally shaped disciplinary paradigms and demonstrates their manifestation in kindergarten settings [9].

Rather than a singular model, “Chinese-style discipline” encompasses a dynamic interplay of competing approaches. Suppressive strategies—such as inducing shame through collective norms or restricting participation—can effectively regulate behavior and foster empathy. Conversely, supportive strategies—such as encouraging self-reflection or assigning leadership roles—promote fairness and moral understanding.

Additionally, intergenerational conflicts within families further complicate disciplinary practices. Survey data indicate that 93% of parents perceive significant differences between their own parenting philosophies and those of the grandparent generation. In the prevalent “4+2+1” family structure, such tensions are particularly pronounced. Addressing these challenges requires balancing respect for elder perspectives with adherence to evidence-based educational practices.

5. Reflection and Prospects

5.1 As Researchers: The Application of Interdisciplinary Approaches

Recent shifts in childhood studies have moved from “researching children” toward “researching with and for children” (Christensen & James, 2000) [10], emphasizing children’s voices and perspectives. This transformation necessitates methodological innovation.

Xu Jing’s integration of ethnographic and experimental approaches bridges the divide between humanistic and positivist traditions, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding moral development. Future research should further strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration, integrating insights from psychology, education, and sociology to deepen our understanding of children’s moral formation.

5.2 Children as Method: Respecting Subjectivity

Children actively construct their understanding of the world through pre-existing intuitions and expectations, rather than passively receiving information. Moral education must therefore prioritize children’s subjective experiences, employing experiential and participatory approaches to cultivate independent thinking and decision-making [11].

5.3 As Caregivers: Balancing Ideals and Reality

As articulated in Kahlil Gibran’s *On Children*, children are not possessions but independent beings. While they draw moral nourishment from society, they also actively construct their own ethical systems. Effective moral education requires balancing aspirational ideals with practical constraints, avoiding dilemmas akin to the “prisoner’s dilemma” [8].

Ultimately, children’s moral development is a systemic endeavor requiring coordinated efforts from family, school, and society. By fostering a supportive environment, integrating structured education, and cultivating a positive moral climate, a holistic moral education ecosystem can be established. Xu Jing’s work provides critical insights into this process, emphasizing the importance of empathy, fairness, and social interaction in shaping children’s moral worlds. Future directions should prioritize interdisciplinary research, respect for children’s agency, and the cultivation of moral competencies suited to an evolving society.

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