Moral Compasses For Young Children

The central theme in this essay will focus on young children's moral compasses and if they exist. Additionally, I will investigate whether the evidence I find suggests that morality is either innate or experienced. Issues with looking into morality is that the definition is subjective as it is viewed differently in individual groups within society. Many have disagreed about whether or not the notion of morality should be taken out of serious debates (Bateson 1991; Griffiths, 2002). Haidt and Kesebir (2010) state that morality is differentiating between right and wrong and that a person should be fair to others. A moral compass is within a person and gives children a guide to what is right and wrong.

There is evidence that children certainly do have a moral compass from a young age. Warneken and tomasello (2009) found that around 14-18 months infants show random helping behaviours. Also, Hamlin JK, Wynn K, Bloom P (2007) found that from an early age children possess the capability of determining right and wrong in different situations. The study used infants from the ages of 6 to 10 months old and involved them viewing two different scenarios. One involved a climber being helped and the other scene involved a climber being hindered by someone else. Results found that the infants picked the helper which proposes they made a decision resulting in the helper being branded as good. From this Hamlin also concluded that the skill of making a moral decision is innate. On the contrary, Scarf et al (2012) uses an alternative explanation to the one that Hamlin proposes. Scarf uses the simple association hypothesis to demonstrate why the infants chose the helper over the hinderer as perceptual events influence the infant's choices. Thus, providing a hinderance to the Hamlin Et al (2007)'s claim ""the capacity to evaluate individuals based on their social interactions is universal and unlearned".

In addition, there is also a scientific aspect to whether children's moral compass is innate. There is an involvement of cognitive reasoning and affective reactions within the development of morality. Results from lesion and neuroimaging research have shown a role of a neural circuit of reciprocally connected regions in moral cognition. Specifically, the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), insula (AIC), amygdala, and posterior superior temporal sulcus (pSTS) (Moll, de Oliviera-Souza, & Eslinger, 2003). Further studies carried out by researchers such as Yurgelun-Todd (2007) have provided supporting evidence for the role of science in the development of morality in children. The study showed that the younger the participant the more active the amygdala, posterior insula, and supplementary motor area (SMA) were when faced with watching accidental painful situations. Most people find it uncomfortable and unpleasant to witnessing other people suffering and this is seen to be the underlying factor of human morality (Turiel, 2002; Blair,1995). This shows that children are born with a basic understanding of morality which implies they do in fact have a moral compass which is innate.

Twin studies are also useful in showing the power of genetics on morality in children and the suggestion that it is innate. Einsberg and Fabes (1998) discovered that identical twins are more similar with how they approach situations morally than fraternal twins are. This provides some evidence for the role of genetics rather than environment in morality in children. But there have been twin studies that support the role of the environment on a child's moral compass. Volbrecht et al (2007) perceived over 200 twin pairs who were 2 years old reacting to their main caregiver who faked inuring their finger and pretended to feel pain for a brief time period. The

results showed that the children helping was due to their unique and shared environment rather than genetic influences. This piece of evidence by Volbrecht shows that indeed children display a moral compass, but it may not just be innate as the role of the environment may come into play.

Supporting this theory that morality isn't just innate is Aristotle (1994 [4th century BCE]: 26) who said '[N]one of the moral virtues arises in us by nature . . . [R]ather we are adapted by nature to receive them and are made perfect by habit'. This shows that a child's moral compass may be present, but it needs to be developed for it to be functional. One of the arguments for morality in children being learned is focused on the role of the family. Hinde (2002) found a compelling argument that the family acts as a medium for children to learn and understand moral judgements. Berkowitz and Grych (2000) found five core parenting styles which effect a child's development and the key one that impacts a child's moral compass is modelling. They found that parents who exhibited positive behaviour had children who behaved in a similar way.