

Can Values Be Taught

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At one level, the question if values can be taught is like asking if history can be taught or if mathematics can be taught. Yes, values can indeed be taught as a subject. But since it's a subject that does not deal with facts and since we cannot always claim to be more conscientious than our children, it merits a completely different treatment.

That also bring us to the question if values should be taught as a separate discipline. Aren't they already embedded in disciplines like environmental studies, social and political life (or civics, as some boards term it) and even in literature? After all, our constitutional values cover a wide range of democratic ideals for an engaged citizenry. CBSE even introduced value-based questions in subjects like science and mathematics. In addition to all this, most schools also display their own value framework to students through posters and other artworks.

At the same time our children also witness up-close how adults known to them indulge in big or small corruptions: from trying to bribe the traffic police for jumping the signal to not paying entry fee for children at parks or museums ("You can pass off for a 4-year-old.").

At traffic signals, they see street children knocking on car windows and observe how their parents respond. Can we expect every parent to discuss the complexity involved in responding to begging? Will giving money encourage begging as a profession and feed those who run the nexus? Will the money you give be used for food or drugs? Where do values like compassion and charity fit in?

It is one thing to talk about concepts like equality and fairness in classrooms, but it is an altogether different thing to engage with these ideals in day-to-day situations. For example, is it fine to pass off a group of children teasing a dark-skinned child for his complexion as innocent childish mischief? If a child sees her best friend copying in his exams, should she inform the teacher? Why or why not?

In the absence of a deep-rooted awareness of what constitutes an ethical environment and what goes in to making an ethical decision, can we expect our children to make informed ethical decisions in varying contexts? An ethical environment, as Simon Blackburn defines it is “the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live”. And ethics, in a way, is the study of how people decide what is right and wrong in specific contexts. Do we make ethical decisions based on some belief systems (for example, based on what our religious texts tell us)? Or do we weigh the outcomes of our actions before we decide to do something? Or do we give more weight to our intentions irrespective of what outcomes our actions may result in? Or are our actions based on some social contract—something that is considered acceptable in our social setting? These are not stand-alone questions; most times they work in conjunction. After all, we are constantly trying to find a balance between relativism (all morals are relative) and dogmatism (blind faith in cultural or religious morals).

Values encompass more than just ethical behaviour. Values like enquiry orientation, curiosity, persistence and rigor of thinking do not strictly fall within the definition of ethical behaviour. But they are an inherent part of what makes us who we are. One way to consciously get children to engage with values is by providing them with situations where they need to make decisions one way or the other—not just make decisions but articulate why they choose to do what they do. And this is not always possible while dealing with subjects like science and math.

Although the National Curriculum Framework 2005 discusses the need for values to be integral to all aspects of schooling, wouldn't it be better if at least one period a week is dedicated to an explicit discussion on values? Even in schools that have a values curriculum, do they have a well-thought out methodology to deal with ethical decision-making and encourage multiple approaches to handling similar situations?

We need to situate the discussions around values in the context of some engaging narratives and provide children with an opportunity to see the relationship between principles, intentions, actions and outcomes in real life situations. However, if the story or discussion ends up being patronizing, we are most likely to lose children's interest. Which is why the activities in a values class need to focus on reasoning as much as on sensitivity and concern for others. And teachers need to learn to accept multiple responses, even if some of the responses do not go down well with them. The idea is to identify why children respond the way they respond and engage with their line of thinking.

To listen to stories that reflect daily concerns, undertake a project that involves a social good, participate in a lively conversation with classmates from different backgrounds that touch up on one's internal conflicts, topical issues in one's immediate neighbourhood and the problems faced by the world at large can at the very least open up children's minds to the values embedded in everyday contexts. And let us hope that these learning experiences pave the way for our children to value ideas like critical thinking, service-orientation and openness to multiple perspectives as important as (or perhaps more critical than) personal ambitions and individual successes.