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Book World

Building A Better Child

THE MORAL INTELLIGENCE OF CHILDREN

How to Raise a Moral Child

By Robert Coles

Random House. 240 pp. \$21

By Amitai Etzioni

ROBERT COLES should be declared a national treasure. Like a fine mint of rare coins, every few years he issues a sterling piece of research, a sophisticated amalgam of social science and humanities, of observations and insights. In this small volume, Coles writes about the importance of what parents do when they model moral behavior, as distinct from when they preach. (At one point he notes that "community service offers us all a chance to put our money where our mouths are . . .") He himself serves as a model in this book, as he draws heavily on his personal and professional conduct, rather than on some kind of theory.

Readers who are looking for 12 steps to moral education, or another list of virtues,

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ILLUSTRATION BY RANDALL ETKO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

will be disappointed. Coles firmly believes that there are no rules or abstractions to follow. Aside from surrounding young people with adults to emulate, moral education, he suggests, should focus on fostering proper behavior rather than attitudes. While narratives and dialogues have their place, the way to educate is to shape the experiences chil-

dren have at home, at school, and in the community. Actually, even such a statement is too much of a generalization. Coles practices what he preaches: His book is filled with accounts of the ways he struggled with various moral educational opportunities, as a consultant for schools, a volunteer, a therapist, and a researcher. The educational pointers he

provides are folded into narratives about Coles's encounters with children, teenagers, parents, teachers and headmasters.

Because the moral tales Coles spins are intricate, and his ruminations about them are subtle and complex, it is almost impossible to do justice to them in the confines of a brief review. His shortest — *Continued on page 9*

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account is of his driving his 9-year-old son to an emergency room after the boy violated his parents' "rule" not to play with some tools and cut himself. As Coles is running traffic lights, his son wonders aloud: "Dad, if we're not careful, we'll make more trouble on our way to getting out of trouble." Coles shares with us numerous thoughts this comment evoked in him, underscoring one point: He delights in his son being concerned about people the rushing car may hit, thus developing what Coles considers the sine qua non of an ethical person: Being able to empathize with others. Children become moral by developing the "smarts" (hence "moral intelligence," the odd term Coles uses in the title and only occasionally in the book) to be able to sense the pain, sadness or joy of others. In one of the few places Coles puts his foot down in this gentle book, he urges parents to say no when their infants become too demanding, thus teaching the children to take into account their parents' feelings and needs. This is a first step to becoming able to empathize with others.

Coles's characterization of the moral person is both essential and puzzling. Em-

pathy undoubtedly is a fundamental psychological capacity without which a moral person cannot evolve. (I argued elsewhere that it must be paired with self-discipline, the ability to hold asocial urges at bay). But is empathy sufficient? Coles implies that empathetic persons will pick up the specific values that constitute morality from those with whom they are empathetic, especially their parents and teachers. However, without a separate capacity for moral judgment, empathy may turn people into amoral conformists. In consumeristic America, for instance, they may feel little more than the pain of those who did not get all the Christmas gifts they hoped for.

YOUNG PEOPLE need to be taught the difference between substantive rights and wrongs, above and beyond being equipped with the capabilities to abide by what is right once they know it. Empathy per se may well cause young persons to care about those who suffer racial discrimination but will not help them to figure out what constitutes a just distribution of society's wealth. Similarly, they may well empathize both with those who face the death penalty and their victims; young people



BY MICAH MARTY

Robert Coles

still need to develop their judgment about the moral standing of the death penalty.

Most of Coles's book is dedicated to accounts of educators who used opportunities to develop empathy in their charges and those who missed such chances. Surprisingly, a major culprit that Coles—himself a psychiatrist—identifies is the therapeutic perspective educators all too often adopt. He tells with considerable dismay

the story of a teacher whose student was caught repeatedly cheating on exams. The teacher refused to deal with the cheating because she believed that the girl was under "stress." To the extent that Coles can bring himself to chide anybody, he criticizes teachers and headmasters who neglect moral education for the sake of psychobabble.

Coles points out that we often wait until moral trouble shows up at our door. He suggests that we should realize that we are sending moral messages to our children all the time, and should express our moral principles without hesitation, before problems arise. He points out that our children, teenagers included, eagerly seek moral direction even when they seem to object and rebel. (Coles at least slightly underestimates the extent to which adolescents draw on their peer groups for such guidance, and overestimates the extent to which educators and parents can win over such groups.)

If all this sounds a bit vague, it is because this is one of those books one must absorb, savor and immerse oneself in. The author is like a master teacher who helps one find the light but does not shine it directly himself. ■