



Doing the right thing because it's the best thing to do.

By Wilson McCaskill

During discussions with some teachers at a recent, PLAY IS THE WAY® Workshop I became even more aware of the need for teachers to empower students by making it obvious, to each and every child, that they know the difference between right and wrong.

Involved in the discussion were a few teachers who were repeating their attendance of a PLAY IS THE WAY® workshop. Hearing me talk about this issue of knowing right from wrong, they realised that the processes I had been outlining were no longer part of their discourse with students. They also realised that in place of those empowering processes were the words and actions of a teacher playing boss, and as convenient as that often was, it simply served to make students reliant on the teacher to make sure the right thing was done.

There is every likelihood that these teachers are not the only ones to have dropped this valuable approach by the wayside. So, let me share it with you again.

KNOWING RIGHT FROM WRONG

The first step on a child's journey towards independent, self- managed behaviour is to recognise that they know right from wrong.

Having grown up in families that are a part of a larger network of social groups and communities, most children arrive at school with a more than adequate idea of what is considered to be socially appropriate or inappropriate, acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong by the community and culture to which they belong.

Armed with this information is one thing. Being strong enough to act upon it is another. Children are empowered when they not only know right from wrong but can make themselves do the right thing even when they don't want to.

For this to happen, children have to believe that doing the right thing is invariably the best thing to do. This belief can be nurtured by encouraging them to notice and understand the positive outcomes of their own, and others, appropriate and right behaviour. Give them ample evidence that right is best, both for them and the community in which they live.

We are doing well as adults when our children answer the question, "Why do you do the right thing?" by saying something like, "Because I feel good doing it," or "Because it's the best thing to do."



I fear too many would answer, “Because I’ll get into trouble if I don’t,” or “My Mum (or some other adult figure) told me to,” or “I’ll get something nice if I do.”

FEELING POWERFUL

All children, and I dare say adults as well, like to feel powerful. We can, through careful guidance help children to feel powerful every time they do the right and best thing. Children who only do the right thing for fear of getting into trouble or because they will get a reward, I would suggest, feel decidedly powerless.

These children regain their sense of power by deliberately doing the wrong thing. This is invariably done when the authority figure is not present or when a reward is not forthcoming. Indeed, doing the wrong thing can be a ploy to trigger the giving of an even bigger reward when the right thing is done.

If the authority figure is lacking the power that these children mistakenly believe the position carries; if the authority figure is unable or unwilling to make these children do the right thing, then the price may well be blatant anti-authoritarian behaviour, designed to create fear and chaos in that adult and the world they appear too weak to control.

Authority figures, who use a big stick to maintain their authority, are usually reluctant to put it down and the pressure of maintaining their authority has them frequently looking for a bigger stick.

Authority dependent children, who see adults and the control they exert, as the pinnacle of power can often abandon any sense of an independent, empowered self and replace it with a compliant, too eager to please, indecisive, reliant and fragile personality that needs constant assurance and support if they are to function with any degree of effectiveness.

If they don’t go that way they can sometimes become those disengaged, aggressive, contrary and disillusioned children who indulge in dangerous behaviours and conflicts that generate a sense of rush and power, and which distracts them from the painful emptiness that would otherwise be present.

By adopting processes that help children to recognise the benefits, strength and power in doing what is right and best, we can help them to be the masters of their own behaviour.

By helping them to understand that by doing the wrong thing, when they know the right thing, they disadvantage and weaken themselves and others, we can turn them towards finding the strength to do the right thing.

BUT WHAT IF....?

Now, for a short moment let’s go back to my conversation with the teachers at the workshop. They agreed with the ideas and could see the importance of the process,



but for them the problem lay in what to say. Although I informed them of the key words they continued to ask questions, almost all of which were precluded with, “But what if...?”

It struck me that if I could write down a variety of ways to engage with students over this issue of right and wrong, it would be of help. I asked them if they felt a list of scenarios would help and they, to a person, said it would.

So, here is a list of scenarios that I hope you will find useful.

In my early relationships with students I try to get them to recognise that they do know right from wrong and that I expect them to act upon that information.

What value is wealth if our children are poor in values?

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THE TALK THAT HELPS THE WALK

In all the following scenarios, T = Teacher

Scenario 1

Mary is busy doing her work.

- T: Mary, are you doing the right thing or wrong thing?
M: *(Looks up confused. Thinks for a while, then says vaguely with a question in her voice)* Right thing?
T: You're right Mary, keep going please.

Scenario 2

Billy and John are distracting each other.

- T: Billy and John, are you doing the right thing or the wrong thing?
B: Wrong thing.
T: John?
J: Wrong.
T: I'm glad you both know that. It would have been worrying if you didn't. The big question now is, “Are you strong enough to do the right thing?” John?
J: Yes.
T: Billy?
B: Yes. *(With a giggle)*



- T: The giggle worries me Billy. Let me ask you again and take charge of the giggle before you answer please. *(Asks question again)*
- B: Yes.
- T: Good. Then I am happy to leave you to do it. Thank you.

Scenario 3

A group of four children are working together at a table. They are enjoying each other's company and the work is going well even though there is lots of talk and laughter. Teacher waits for a mini explosion of laughter.

- T: *(Speaking in a firm voice as if something was wrong)* Boys and girls at the far table, would you stop your work for a second please. *(Looking strongly at the group)* Would somebody in your group tell me if the way you are behaving is right or wrong?

A student sensing the tone and firmness of the teacher's manner answers.

- S: Wrong.
- T: Wrong! *(Changing tone and lightening up)* Were you all doing the work?
- S: Yes.
- T: Were you enjoying working with each other?
- S: Yes.
- T: Did the work have to be done in silence?
- S: No.
- T: Were you making it difficult for others to work?
- S: No.
- T: Do you think you are doing good work?
- S: Yes.
- T: So, answer the question again. Are you behaving in the right or wrong way?
- S: Right way.
- T: Correct. You were behaving in the right way. Boys and girls, would you all stop and listen carefully for a short while. Sally thought her group was behaving in the wrong way because I sounded firm and unhappy when I questioned them. Would you agree Sally?
- S: Yes. *(With a smile)*
- T: Boys and girls, it is for you to know right from wrong and then have the strength to use what you know. When I question your behaviour take a second to think and don't let my tone or manner tempt you into giving me an answer you haven't thought about. If you're doing the right thing, see it, say it and keep it up. If you're doing the wrong thing see it, say it and change it. Both will take strength to do.

**Every classroom must offer
children practice in
creating the world in which
they want to live.**

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Scenario 4

Curtis is doing nothing while the others are working.

- T: Curtis, are you doing the right thing.
C: I'm doing nothing.
T: Knowing what you're meant to be doing, is doing nothing the right thing to do.
C: Nah.
T: Knowing that is the first step. Doing something to change that is the stronger but much harder step. You know it's much harder because you haven't been able to make yourself take that step yet. Take a little time to think about that and see if you can find the courage and strength inside yourself to start doing the right thing. I promise you this; when you find the courage, whatever your feeling right now will change. It may or may not change for the better, but whatever it changes to will be better for you than the feelings that are stopping you from doing what is right.

Scenario 5

Connecting RIGHT to STRONG and WRONG to WEAK

Mandy is playing in a team but neither her nor the team is doing very well.

- T: Mandy, you have been sticking to the rules of the game and working hard to get some points. Are you doing the wrong or right thing?
M: The right thing.
T: Has your team got any points yet?
M: No.
T: Are you going to give up?
M: No.
T: Is that the right or wrong thing?
M: Right thing.
T: You're doing the right thing Mandy, there is no doubt about that. Do you feel good about doing it?
M: Yes.
T: Do you feel good about having no points?
M: No.
T: I can understand that, and still you and your team keep doing the right thing. Tell me Mandy, when you do the right thing do you think it's the strong thing or weak thing to do?
M: Strong thing.
T: You're right Mandy. It's the strong thing to do and even though your team is losing, you are strong enough to do the right thing. Do you feel good about that?
M: Yes.
T: I'm glad you do. Now, let me ask your team mate Angelo some questions. Angelo, if your team had abused each other for any mistakes or tried to bend



or break some rules to get points, would that have been the right or wrong thing to do?

A: *(With a tone that shows he is slightly annoyed at the simplicity of the question)* Wrong thing.

T: Yes it's obvious isn't it, which makes me wonder why some people do such things. Perhaps they don't know what I'm sure you do know. When a person does the wrong thing Angelo, is it the strong thing or weak thing to do?

A: Weak thing.

T: Exactly Angelo, and knowing that will keep you doing the strong thing and the right thing – as you and your team have shown during this game. You may not have got any points yet, but you are certainly strong people.

Boys and girls, we all get better at whatever we practise. If you practise doing the right thing, the better you will get at doing it and the stronger you will become. If you practise doing the weak thing, which is the wrong thing, the better you will become at that, and the weaker you will become.

Let me ask you this question. Do you want to be a strong boy who gets stronger, and I'm not talking about your muscles here Angelo, or do you want to be a boy who gets weaker?

A: A strong boy who gets stronger.

T: And that's exactly what you're doing Angelo, because you take every opportunity to practise doing what?

A: Doing strong things.

T: And how do you know they are strong things?

A: Because they are right things.

T: Correct Angelo. Boys and girls, never forget *it takes great strength to be sensible*. And if you ever need proof of that, just look at people who frequently do the wrong things. You will see people practising behaviours that make them weaker and weaker, and less and less able to find the strength to do the right thing.

Scenario 6

Casey is applying herself to her maths work, which she hates.

T: Casey, are you doing the right thing?

C: Yes.

T: Does it feel good?

C: *(With frustration and a hint of resentment)* No.

T: Are you being strong?

C: Yes.

T: Congratulations. Nothing is beaten if we run away from it.

VARIATION ONE

T: Casey, are you doing the right thing?

C: Yes.

T: Does it feel good?

C: Yes.

T: That surprises me. You don't like maths and you don't look very happy. Are you sure it feels good?



- C: Nah.
T: So, you're saying it doesn't feel good.
C: I hate it.
T: And it's all right to say so. By understanding how you feel you can deal with it. Are you going to give up?
C: Nah.
T: Do you feel good about knowing how strong you are?
C: Yes.
T: I'm glad you do, because you are being very strong. Casey, you have the strength to do the right thing even when you don't feel like it. Remember to tell your Mum & Dad how well you hung in there today.

Successes easily gained are forgotten quickly. Whereas, those achieved with great effort become memorable experiences that elevate the spirit.

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Scenario 7

Ben is being inappropriate.

- T: Ben, strong thing or weak thing you're doing?
B: Weak thing.
T: Can you change that and do the strong thing?
B: Yes.
T: Thank you.

Scenario 8

Richard is helping Mark.

- T: Mark, tell me about Richard's behaviour?
M: It's strong.
T: And is it helping you?
M: Yes.
T: Then it must be strong. Thank you Richard.

Scenario 9

Gwen is annoying Jesse, which Jesse is actually enjoying.

- T: Jessie, Gwen's behaviour?



- J: She's doing the wrong thing.
T: Have you asked her to stop?
J: No.
T: Tell me about your behaviour Jesse.
J: It's weak.
T: Yes it is. Both of you know right from wrong and Gwen could have stopped herself, but she didn't and you needed to help her by being strong. Although Gwen was annoying you, were you in some way enjoying the distraction?
J: (*In false indignation*) Nah.
T: That's even more reason why you had to do the right thing and speak to her. Gwen, if Jesse had asked you to stop and you did, would that have been the right thing to do?
G: Yes.
T: And would you have been strong enough to do it?
G: Yes.
T: It's good to know that. Now, what you must find is the strength to not do the wrong thing in the first place. Your moment of weakness put pressure on Jesse. Pressure you needed to put on yourself to help you do the right thing. Does that make sense?
G: Yes.
T: Jesse, are you a weak person for not stopping Gwen or did you have a weak moment.
J: A weak moment.
T: That's right. Even the strongest have weak moments. What matters is that you recognise them when they happen, understand why they happened and work hard to stop them happening again. As a strong person Jesse, you won't want to repeat a weak moment if you can help it. So, the next time someone tries to annoy or distract you I'm sure you will do the right and strong thing. Won't you?
J: Yes.
T: And Gwen, when you feel a weak moment coming on, take a moment to think and catch it before it happens. Remember, wanting to be strong is the first step. Doing the strong thing is the harder one.

Strong friends keep
you safe by saying the
things you need to
hear.

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