



What's right?

Introduction

This activity is a way of having a conversation with your child about right and wrong, when there are things pulling in different directions

You'll need

Your child (two or more are even better for this!)

The following story:

Tim goes to the shop to get his mum a birthday present, but the big box of chocolates he sees costs one pound more than he's got, so he goes home. The next day, at school, he finds a purse that's been dropped, which has three pound coins in it and has the person's name written on the label inside.

Activity

Read out the story to your child or children and ask: 'What will Tim do?'

- Take out one pound so that he can buy his mum the big box of chocolates and give the purse and two pounds to his teacher?
- Use one pound from the purse to buy his mum the chocolates, keep two pounds for himself and throw the purse in the bin?
- Give the purse and all three pounds in it to his teacher?

Whatever your child answers, without saying whether the answer is right or wrong, ask 'Why will Tim do that?'

When your child has given some explanation, you can say what you think and why. Try to make it a discussion about what the reasons might be for making particular choices and how they weigh up.

You could try varying the story, so Tim finds a lot more money in the purse, or that he needs the money to buy his mum some medicine to make her better. Then you could ask your child if these make a difference to Tim's choice.

If you can get two or more children to discuss this among themselves, that's a bonus!

The explanation

Psychologists who study children's moral development consider that it is more important for children to reason about what's right and wrong than for them just to believe that some things are right and some are not.

After all, many of our choices in life have both positive and negative aspects. Part of making mature choices is being able to weigh up the pros and cons of different possibilities. Talking with children about how these choices are made is more likely to help them develop grown-up ways of thinking than just telling them what's right and wrong.

Kohlberg, a psychologist who's focused on children's morals, has described the series of stages that children's moral thinking goes through as they grow up:

1. absolute beliefs that some things are right and some are wrong: a fixed set of rules that must be obeyed
2. understanding that people have different beliefs about right and wrong, and that it's important to think about fairness
3. motives are important: 'good' things are done for 'good' reasons
4. it's important for society that people go along with laws and general ideas about moral behaviour
5. reasoning clearly about the moral principles that can guide behaviour

What stage do you think your child is at? How did you reason about the dilemma in the story?

Giving children the opportunity to talk about their views with other children of a similar age has been found to be a big help in developing moral reasoning. This seems to be more effective than trying to tell children how they should think, so it's worth making opportunities for children to talk about such things.