

# FOCUS

## on Early Childhood Mental Health



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## Moral Development: Raising Caring Kids

When she was six years old, Alice loved her "Magic Slate." Her friend Amy didn't have a Magic Slate and really liked Alice's. So Alice gave it to her. What made Alice willing to give away her much-loved toy? How did Alice learn to be generous and to care about Amy's feelings?

We all want our children to care about others, like Alice did. We want them to be kind and generous and know the difference between right and wrong. However, understanding how others feel and distinguishing between right and wrong require abstract thinking skills that very young children haven't yet developed. How soon can we reasonably expect them to care about others, and how can we help them while they're very young to begin to learn about right and wrong?

### Milestones in learning to care about others

- *0-12 months*: child begins to respond to parents' emotions (babies respond more to adults who are enthusiastic and happy); begins to understand give-and-take (when he smiles, mom smiles; when she cries, dad tries to make her feel better)
- *12-24 months*: child wants independence, but also shows concern when caregiver is unhappy; begins to learn about sharing
- *24-36 months*: child becomes aware that hurting someone is wrong, and may feel some remorse
- *3-4 years*: child is able to share more consistently; can think about a moral dilemma (what if...)
- *4-6 years*: child may want to share with people who don't have (like Alice did when she gave her Magic Slate to Amy); understands fairness

### How to help children learn to care about others

- Model caring behavior; make sure your child consistently feels loved and cared for; help the child think about how his or her behavior affects others (how would you feel if someone did that to you?)
- Set limits so the child knows what is right; begin to talk about why certain things are right or wrong
- Make sure the child's daily experiences includes examples of the caring behavior you expect (family members, teachers, friends, media)

### Resources

- "Early Childhood Moral Development," by Angela Oswalt; <http://tinyurl.com/3r3oybs>
- "Encouraging Self-Regulation, Morality, and Conscience," in Sarah Landry, *Pathways to Competence*, Brookes Publishing, 2009, pp. 384-389
- "Helping Children Build a Conscience," by Barbara Frazier; <http://tinyurl.com/3scb7t7>