

Why young people commit crime and how moral education could help

May 15 2020, by Neema Trivedi-Bateman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There is a significant link between moral emotions and offending behavior in young people. Moral emotions are learnt—and more attention needs to be given to the teaching of morals in childhood to address this link between morality and crime.

My research has proved that young people are more likely to carry out [violent acts](#) if they have weak empathy, shame and guilt, and if they do not feel violence is wrong. On the surface, this may seem obvious, but the research provides a new, evidence-based clarity about the decisions that lead to [crime](#). It was previously thought that other personal factors—such as lack of [self-control](#) or [social disadvantage](#) – or external factors like the [opportunity to commit crime](#) were at the root of why crime occurs.

Having poor morals doesn't mean that a young person is inherently bad. Morality is learnt in childhood. It is the people that we spend time with that [teach us morals](#). It follows that if someone's [moral development](#) is insufficient, they shouldn't be immediately labelled as "bad" but that they have had inadequate or misguided teaching from the important people in their life.

Moral development programmes should be developed and taught to children to reduce the likelihood of them growing up to believe that criminal behavior could be seen as morally acceptable. Moral education should be considered to be as crucial as nutrition, health, and formal education for our future generations to thrive.

Moral emotions

[I carried out](#) in-depth interviews with 50 young and prolific violent offenders, looking at the role of moral emotions in the decision to commit violence. I asked them about their most recent act of violence. In some cases, this had occurred the day before the interview itself.

My findings provided evidence that empathy, shame and guilt were lacking. For example, when asked "did you feel ashamed or guilty when others found out?" one person responded that "there's not much guilt involved in the whole situation to be honest."

My findings are backed up by the results of a [groundbreaking study](#) carried out at the University of Cambridge. I worked with the study team for eight years and led the research team during some of the interview phases.

The [Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development study \(PADS+\)](#) tracked the lives of a large, representative sample of young people for ten years, a unique and thorough approach to discovering how and why we behave in certain ways.

Around 4% of the study sample—roughly only 35 young people—were responsible for almost half of all total crimes reported by approximately 700 people [across a ten-year period](#) from the age of 12 until they reached 22.

This small handful of individuals reported weak moral emotions: empathy, shame and guilt. We found that the individuals who reported the weakest moral emotions admitted to involvement in, on average, 71 crimes. By contrast, those reporting the strongest sense of moral emotion only admitted involvement in one crime.

Peer influence

Young people tend to spend most of their time with parents or primary caregivers, teachers and their peer groups. If a child's peers or parents don't think it's wrong to commit a crime, or lack empathy or guilty feelings towards the people affected by that crime, then this is likely to affect how the young person feels as well. Research shows that lack of guilt for rule-breaking behavior can be displayed from [as young as three](#).

It is very likely that the primary and critical time windows for morality development begin in early childhood, and extend to later childhood and adolescence. It appears that major life events—such as having stable

relationships with [family members](#) or a partner, or a job, or having a child—can reinforce one's moral code and [reduce the likelihood of offending](#) behavior.

This partially explains the [dip in the age-crime curve](#), which is a general and widely reported trend: [young people](#) peak in terms of offending in middle to late adolescence and reduce offending substantially by their early twenties.

Moral education

Research shows that spending time with people [who provide examples of strong morals](#) can lead to law-abiding behavior. If a child does not successfully experience early bonding experiences and develop moral and emotional commitments to others, the development of empathy may be [prevented or blocked](#).

Students absorb positive moral behaviors when surrounded with just and fair [role models, rules, and interactions](#). Schools that foster a sense of community and hold discussions about morality can provide this environment. But if environments that foster moral development are not prolonged and sustained across several years, the effect on moral behavior [may be short-lived](#).

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