

# **THE YOUTH RESEARCH FORUM**

## **The Development of the Moral Compass A study among children aged 7 to 16 in the UK**

### **Final report: the online quantitative survey**

Based on a nationally representative sample of 750 x 7-16 year olds

**Glen Smith & Nick Winkfield**

'The most important human endeavour is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.'

**Albert Einstein**

# Study objectives

- How does the Moral Compass develop from age seven to 16?
- What do children understand by morality?
- Who do children turn to for moral guidance?
- What part do religion, gender and class play in moral development?
- What are the implications for education and social policy?

## Methods

1. Literature review
2. Qualitative research, i.e. focus groups and interviews
3. Development of survey instruments
4. Online survey of 750 children aged 7-16, sample drawn from the *Research Now* UK household panel
5. Data collection from December 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> 2010

# How does the moral compass develop from age seven to 16?

- By 7, children are **aware** of what's right and wrong
- As they get older they become more nuanced in moral **thinking**:
  - Much less asking for guidance, although they do still want to have someone to turn to
  - More thinking about consequences (eg punishment)
  - Moral **behaviour** declines with age up to 16 - except in sport.

# What do children understand by morality?

- Most important aspects of morality:
  - Loyalty to friends
  - Caring for people in need
  - Being fair to everyone
- Less important:
  - Showing respect
  - Tolerance of other people's choices
  - Belonging to a group with the same moral ideas as you
- The order of importance remains almost exactly the same at 15-16 as at 7-9

# Importance of religion in your life right now

Q. How important is religion in your life right now?  
(mean score on scale of 1= “not important at all” and 10= “very important”)

|            | Total<br>Mean score<br>(1-10) | 7-9<br>Mean score<br>(1-10) | 10-12<br>Mean score<br>(1-10) | 13-14<br>Mean score<br>(1-10) | 15-16<br>Mean score<br>(1-10) |
|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Importance | 4.2                           | 4.9                         | 4.1                           | 4.3                           | 3.4                           |

Base: n= 750 196 195 165 194  
\* = less than 0.5%

# What part do religion, gender and class play in moral development?

- Religious upbringing:
  - has virtually little bearing on the development of ***moral awareness or beliefs***
  - leads to more concern about letting themselves down, less about getting punished
- No clear relationship between religious upbringing and the ***development of moral behaviour***
- Very slight gender and social class differences, e.g. girls attach more importance than boys to fairness, including in sport.

# Who do children turn to for moral guidance?

Q. Who would you ask if you needed advice about whether something is right or wrong?

| Would ask...     | Total % | 7-9 % | 10-12 % | 13-14 % | 15-16 % |
|------------------|---------|-------|---------|---------|---------|
| Mother           | 87      | 93    | 89      | 88      | 78      |
| Father           | 57      | 65    | 57      | 57      | 49      |
| Grandparent      | 32      | 44    | 33      | 26      | 24      |
| Teacher          | 31      | 44    | 35      | 25      | 20      |
| Best friend      | 23      | 19    | 19      | 27      | 26      |
| Uncle or aunt    | 13      | 20    | 13      | 11      | 8       |
| Sister           | 12      | 14    | 12      | 10      | 12      |
| Brother          | 11      | 14    | 9       | 10      | 9       |
| Religious person | 5       | 5     | 4       | 8       | 4       |
| Internet         | 4       | 3     | 2       | 7       | 7       |
| Neighbour        | 2       | 2     | 2       | 2       | 1       |
| Other            | 1       | -     | 1       | 1       | 3       |

# Policy implications

- **Should ACR be set with regard to:**
  - Moral awareness - age <7?
  - Moral thinking - age 10-18?
  - The social and cultural environment?
  - The presence / absence of moral guidance / mentoring available to children?
- **Allocating responsibilities - the role of:**
  - Parents - mothers *and* fathers?
  - Social services?
  - Police?
  - Teachers?
  - Religious organisations?
  - Community / voluntary organisations?
  - The media?
- **The case for/against faith schools**



# The extent of religious upbringing

| Brought up with..... | Total % | 7-9 % | 10-12 % | 13-14 % | 15-16 % |
|----------------------|---------|-------|---------|---------|---------|
| No religion          | 60      | 59    | 63      | 59      | 59      |
| Any religion         | 40      | 41    | 37      | 41      | 41      |

|                   |    |    |    |    |    |
|-------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Any Christianity  | 33 | 32 | 32 | 33 | 35 |
| Church of England | 21 | 20 | 20 | 21 | 21 |
| Roman Catholic    | 10 | 10 | 10 | 9  | 12 |
| Other Christian   | 2  | 2  | 2  | 3  | 2  |

|                 |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Islam           | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Other religions | 5 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 3 |

|               |    |    |    |    |    |
|---------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Non-religious | 49 | 51 | 53 | 45 | 45 |
| Secular       | *  | 1  | 2  | 1  | 2  |
| Agnostic      | 3  | 2  | 2  | 2  | 5  |
| Atheist       | 5  | 4  | 5  | 7  | 6  |
| Humanist      | 2  | 2  | 1  | 3  | 2  |

|                                |     |     |     |     |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Base: n=<br>* = less than 0.5% | 750 | 196 | 195 | 165 | 194 |
|--------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

# Responses to a moral dilemma:

Q. Let's say that you go into a shop to buy some sweets and you find a £20 note on the floor. What might you do?

|   | Total % | 7-9% | 10-12 % | 13-14 % | 15-16 % |
|---|---------|------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Right choices</b>                                  |         |      |         |         |         |
| Hand the money in to the shop keeper                  | 40      | 36   | 43      | 41      | 41      |
| Give the money to your mother or father               | 17      | 36   | 19      | 8       | 4       |
| Hand the money in to the police                       | 7       | 9    | 6       | 7       | 5       |
| <b>"Morally defensible" choices</b>                   |         |      |         |         |         |
| Give the money to a charity                           | 3       | 3    | 1       | 3       | 4       |
| Give the money to someone who needs it the most       | 1       | 1    | 1       | 1       | 3       |
| Leave the money on the floor                          | 1       | 1    | 1       | 1       | -       |
| <b>Wrong choices</b>                                  |         |      |         |         |         |
| Keep the money for yourself                           | 12      | 2    | 10      | 17      | 19      |
| Take the money home and save it                       | 11      | 8    | 11      | 15      | 12      |
| Pick up the money and spend it immediately            | 2       | 2    | 2       | 2       | 2       |
| Make sure I won't be found out if I kept the money    | 2       | -    | 2       | 2       | 5       |
| Give the money to your friends and spend it with them | 1       | 1    | 1       | 1       | 3       |
| Give the money to a friend                            | *       | -    | 1       | 1       | -       |
| Give the money to your brother or sister              | *       | 1    | 1       | -       | -       |
| Base: n=  | 750     | 196  | 195     | 165     | 194     |
| * = less than 0.5%                                    |         |      |         |         |         |

# Getting found out

Q. If you did something wrong and got found out, which of these would worry you the most?

|                                | Total % | 7-9 % | 10-12 % | 13-14 % | 15-16 % |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|---------|---------|
| Getting punished               | 27      | 39    | 26      | 24      | 20      |
| Being found out                | 17      | 17    | 16      | 15      | 19      |
| Letting your parents down      | 42      | 39    | 45      | 35      | 47      |
| Letting yourself down          | 11      | 5     | 8       | 15      | 16      |
| Doing wrong again              | 2       | 4     | 1       | 1       | 2       |
| Other                          | 1       | 1     | 1       | 1       | 1       |
|                                |         |       |         |         |         |
| Base: n=<br>* = less than 0.5% | 750     | 196   | 195     | 165     | 194     |

# Responses to a moral challenge X religious upbringing

Q. Let's say that you go into a shop to buy some sweets and you find a £20 note on the floor. What might you do?

|  | Total % | 7-9% | 10-12 % | 13-14 % | 15-16 % |
|--|---------|------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Hand the money to the shop keeper</b>       |         |      |         |         |         |
| All children                                   | 40      | 36   | 43      | 41      | 41      |
| Brought up in a religion                       | 46      | 36   | 51      | 54      | 46      |
| Brought up with no religion                    | 36      | 37   | 38      | 33      | 38      |
| <b>Give the money to your mother or father</b> |         |      |         |         |         |
| All children                                   | 17      | 36   | 19      | 8       | 4       |
| Brought up in a religion                       | 15      | 31   | 15      | 7       | 6       |
| Brought up with no religion                    | 18      | 39   | 21      | 8       | 3       |
| <b>Keep the money for yourself</b>             |         |      |         |         |         |
| All children                                   | 12      | 2    | 10      | 17      | 19      |
| Brought up in a religion                       | 7       | 1    | 5       | 7       | 14      |
| Brought up with no religion                    | 15      | 3    | 13      | 23      | 23      |
| <b>Take the money home and save it</b>         |         |      |         |         |         |
| All children                                   | 11      | 8    | 11      | 15      | 12      |
| Brought up in a religion                       | 11      | 11   | 7       | 6       | 18      |
| Brought up with no religion                    | 12      | 6    | 13      | 21      | 9       |
| Base: n=                                       | 750     | 196  | 195     | 165     | 194     |
| * = less than 0.5%                             |         |      |         |         |         |

## Dostoyevsky *The Idiot*

*"A child can be told everything - everything!  
I've always been struck by the fact that grown-ups,  
fathers and mothers know their children so little.  
One must never conceal anything from children on  
the pretext that they are little and it is too early for  
them to know things.*

*What a la lamentable and unfortunate ideal! And  
how quick children to notice that their fathers  
consider them to be too little to understand, when  
they understand everything.*