



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

By Wilson McCaskill

During a discussion with teachers at a, PLAY IS THE WAY® Workshop I reinforced the need to ensure students were empowered with the knowledge that they do know the difference between right and wrong and more often than not, know what is the right and best thing to do in most situations.

Several admitted that in place of informative interactions with students they tended to simply play the boss and direct behaviour. This often resulted in students who couldn't think for themselves, had little initiative and asked fewer questions, couldn't work without direction and constant feedback, had difficulty solving problems and predicting the probable outcomes of their words and actions.

BUT WHAT IF....?

While all the teachers agreed with the need for informative interactions many had difficulty with what to say. Although I encouraged them to use the questions on the *Self-Mastery Checklist* as the basis of their interactions, they continued to ask me 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 said it would.

So, at the end of this article is a list of scenarios that I hope you will find useful.

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

Wilson McCaskill (By Wisdom Not By Force, page 162)

KNOWING RIGHT FROM WRONG

The first step on a child's journey towards independent, self-managed behaviour is to recognise that they do 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 in 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 also 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. Encouraging them to notice and understand the positive outcomes of their own, and other's appropriate and right behaviour, can nurture this belief. Giving them ample evidence that right is best, both for them and the community in which they live cements the belief.

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, feel decidedly powerless, I suggest.

These children regain their sense of power by deliberately saying or doing the wrong thing. This is invariably happening 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 bestowing of an even bigger reward when the right thing is eventually done.

If the authority figure is lacking the power 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, often lose the motivation to be independent and self-regulating and opt for the less challenging role of being too eager to please, indecisive with a fragile personality that needs constant reassurance and support if they are to function with any degree of effectiveness.

If that is not the case, they can sometimes become those disengaged, aggressive, contrary and disillusioned children who indulge in dangerous behaviours and conflicts



that generate the distracting feelings of excitement and power; feelings that will hopefully serve as an antidote to the painful emptiness that would otherwise be present.

By adopting processes that help children to especially recognise the social and emotional benefits of 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 knowingly doing the wrong thing they disadvantage and weaken themselves and others, we can turn them towards finding the strength to do the right thing.

THE TALK THAT HELPS THE WALK

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.

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. Why would the teacher be asking if she was indeed doing the right thing? Mary thinks for a while; unsure of the answer, she hedges her bet and says meekly with a question in her voice)* Right thing?
T: Say that again Mary, please. But this time, trust yourself and say it confidently as a fact, not a question, please.
M: Right thing.
T: You're right Mary, thank you. Please continue with your work.

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. It tempts me to doubt you. Let me ask you again and please take charge of the giggle before you answer. *(Asks question again)*



B: Yes.

T: I believe you and trust you will 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 the inevitable mini explosion of laughter.

T: *(Speaking in a firm voice as if something was wrong)* Those of you working 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, please 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. Everybody, 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: Everybody, 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.***

Wilson McCaskill (By Wisdom Not By Force, Page 6)



Scenario 4

Curtis is doing nothing while the others are working.

- T: Curtis, are you doing the right thing?
C: (*Antagonistically*) I'm doing nothing.
T: (*Curious*) Knowing what you're meant to be doing, is doing nothing the right thing to do?
C: Nah.
T: (*Calmly*) 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. (*Respectfully and insightfully*) 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. (*Pause*) Tell me please; am I angry with you?
C: Nah.
T: I'm glad you can see that.

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 teammate Angelo some questions. Angelo, if your team had put each other down 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. Everybody, 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 person who gets stronger, and I'm not talking about your muscles here Angelo, or do you want to be a person who gets weaker?
- A: A strong person 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. Everybody, never forget *it takes great strength to be sensible*. And if you ever need proof of that, just look at people who frequently do 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: And thank you for deciding to be strong. 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 perfectly 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 should feel good. 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.

Wilson McCaskill (By Wisdom Not By Force, Page 24)

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, please?
- 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. Mark, is there anything you would like to say to 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 please, 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 not to 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 of us 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.***

Wilson McCaskill (By Wisdom Not By Force, Page 72)