



THE LOSS OF CONSCIENCE

By Wilson McCaskill

I'm disturbed by what appears to be the ever diminishing role of conscience as a regulator of behaviour.

Perhaps my constant work with children has distorted my objectivity and overly sensitised my observations, but I can't help but think that the numbers of children who knowingly do the wrong thing with no twinge of conscience is increasing.

They are not alone. TV, newspapers and magazines are not short of stories about people who commit acts ranging from the inappropriate to the heinous without remorse, regret or self-reproach. And I'm tired of perpetrators (often youthful) of crime who smirk confidently at TV cameras, after their convictions, and walk with the confident strut of those who believe their actions have been justified.

I do hope that my perceptions are inaccurate, but believing that an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure I have, in the past few years, been grabbing opportunities to awaken children's awareness of and responsiveness to their inner voice of conscience.

I think of conscience as that dynamic tension between our beliefs and our actions.

Often referred to as our "moral compass" it is activated when we contemplate actions in contradiction of our beliefs and becomes a maelstrom of discontent if we disregard it's warning and do what we shouldn't have.

It talks to us, guides us and speaks to us with an intimacy reserved only for itself. It is meant to be ever alert and present, with the power to inform us even when we don't want it to.

It can also be soothing. Reassuring us when we have done things that were right to do but, for whatever reason, we would have rather not done.

How comforting it would be if this inner voice, the guarding of our conduct, were unable to be switched off.

In being shaped by a child's education, experience and immersion within the moral framework of a society and culture, it appears that conscience is as vulnerable as it is strong.

When exercised, acknowledged, questioned, shaped and guided with care it can serve as life raft, fortress, rocket ship, prison and peacemaker. But, left to its own devices or allowed to simply absorb, discard and treat values as commodities of convenience, conscience falls victim to the whims of its owner and too often whimpers when it should have roared, if indeed it made any noise at all.



As teachers we can raise children's awareness of and reliance on conscience. I have found that students respond positively to questioning that makes them look inwards and listen to their inner voice.

To know it's there, to understand that it is a strong friend, a helper in moments of moral difficulty, a protector of immeasurable strength and limitless value is both uplifting and comforting.

I think it's time to point strongly and directly to a child's conscience when discussing or questioning behaviour. To do so is a natural extension of the, "right thing or wrong thing to do" process that many of you already use.

There are many ways to name conscience that give it impact and meaning. In your first discussions about conscience and the role it plays in guiding people and keeping them and others safe, children will quickly find similes that afford conscience a persona to help make their attachment to it deep and significant.

A fruitful, insightful and often fun exercise is to get children to share their ideas on what conscience is like.

Following are some I've gathered over the years:

- ▶ It's like railway tracks and you're in trouble if you come off.
- ▶ It's like the light in your fridge that comes on when you open the door to show you what's there, but it also tells you the best things to eat.
- ▶ It's like the real you asking you to be real.
- ▶ It's like your own bodyguard.
- ▶ It's like a fly in your brain that doesn't go away until you put rotten thoughts away.
- ▶ It's like your Mum and Dad are in your head but speaking in your voice.
- ▶ It's like your best friend speaking the truth even when you tell them to shut up.

Some ways of bringing conscience and the inner voice into your discourse with children:

- *What is your inner voice telling you?*
- *Before answering, listen to your conscience and then tell me, right thing or wrong thing to do?*
- *I'm glad your conscience stepped in Peter. It has saved you from doing the wrong thing.*



- *Thank you for that apology Angela. You could have walked away without saying sorry, but your conscience would have troubled you. You listened to the advise of your inner voice and did the right thing.*
- *Richard, accept that you're angry. It's not wrong that you are, but you'll do the wrong things with your anger if you don't listen to the good sense of your conscience. Let it talk to you Richard, it will give you good advice.*
- *Mary, your inner voice is a strong friend. It makes good sense and talks the truth but it can't make you listen. You keep doing the wrong thing and feel upset about it when you do. You're listening to your conscience now, which is why you feel upset. You must make the decision to use the good advice of your conscience before you do the wrong thing. Do that and you'll find it makes you strong enough to do the right thing.*
- *Tarny, your conscience spoke the truth and you listened to it. That was brave of you. Now that we know you broke the window and why, you will have to make things right. Accept your consequence with good grace and have a meaningful chat with your conscience; it will help you to better manage your moments of anger.*
- *Jayden, you are getting better at listening to your inner voice. It is always there to help you and you are never alone when it is looking after you.*
- *What a pleasure it is to work with someone whose conscience guides them as well as your does, Mary. From what I can see it speaks to you well before anyone else needs to.*

Teacher: You started being difficult some time ago John and I have said nothing. My hope was that by saying nothing you would hear something far more important. Can you tell me what that something is?

John: My conscience.

Teacher: You have decided to ignore it John, which makes your behaviour not only difficult but also uncaring. When you fail to listen to the inner voice of self-control you arrive at the weak place and invite someone to take control of you. Your conscience makes you your own master John and able to do what is right, and therefore a welcome member of this class. Have you been doing the right or wrong things?

John: Wrong things.

Teacher: Have you been making weak or strong decisions?

John: Weak.



- Teacher: Are you telling the truth or lying right now?
- John: Telling the truth.
- Teacher: Which means that right now you're being strong. Is that correct?
- John: Yes.
- Teacher: Can you stay strong and listen to your conscience?
- John: Yes.
- Teacher: Then tell me, is your conscience telling you to stop doing the wrong thing?
- John: Yes.
- Teacher: Is it telling you to do the right thing?
- John: Yes.
- Teacher: Will you ignore your inner voice?
- John: No.
- Teacher: Let your conscience guide you John. It cares for you and what you do even when you forget to do the same. Both your conscience and I expect you to stop running away from the work we are doing and find the courage and bravery to try as hard as you can, no matter how difficult you find the work or how many mistakes you make. Now, take a moment to listen to your conscience before you answer. Is it telling you to run away by mucking around or is it telling you to be brave and try something? Take a moment to hear your inner voice.
- (PAUSE)
- Tell me what is it saying?
- John: It's saying, try something.
- Teacher: Then please be a wise boy John and do as your conscience asks.