# How good are children at rating the ethical content of moral stories?

Anna Gomberg, Kathleen Zadzora, Rebecca Walter, Darcia Narváez
University of Notre Dame
Dept of Psychology, 118 Haggar Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556
Symposium presentation at the annual meeting of the Association for Moral Education,
November 5, 2005, Cambridge, MA.

AUTHOR CONTACT:
Darcia Narváez
University of Notre Dame
Dept of Psychology, 118 Haggar Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556
OFFICE TEL: 574-631-7874; HOME: 574-243-7874
EMAIL: dnarvaez@nd.edu    FAX: 574-631-8883

## Abstract

The Rating Ethical Content System (RECS; Narvaez, 2008) was developed for adults, but the question remains whether children can recognize moral themes in media with the same competency as adults. The current study aims to test a modified version of the existing scale (RECS-K) for use by children in order to determine whether children can recognize ethical elements in a story. Participants were 93 middle school students, 36 undergraduates and 15 adults who read two moral stories, generated a theme and rated the ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical motivation and ethical action represented in the story. There were age trends on the ability to generate the intended theme of the story (story 1: 85% of children, 97% of undergrads and 93% of adults; story 2: 67% of children, 87% of undergrads, 93% of adults were correct). Story ratings were similar across type of rating (sensitivity, judgment, focus, action) and for each story except for age trends in story 2 sensitivity and action—adults outperformed both younger groups. Adults were more consistent in their moral comprehension across tasks and stories.

## Summary

The Rating Ethical Content Scale (Narvaez et al. 1998 1999) was developed to allow individuals to rate the ethical content of stories based on Rest's four-component model of morality including the elements of ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical focus, and ethical action (Rest 1983, Narvaez & Rest 1995). This scale was developed for adults, but the question remains whether children can recognize moral themes in media with the same competency as adults. Advocates of moral and character education have often encouraged parents and educators to use stories and films that teach morality when educating children, yet there is little research

examining how to analyze the lessons that children's media teaches.  The current study aims to test a modified version of the existing scale (RECS-K) for use by children in order to determine whether children can recognize ethical elements in a story.

Due to the length and complex language of the adult RECS, the RECS-K aimed to decrease the number of items under each category of moral reasoning as well as simplify the language, making it appropriate for grade school-aged subjects.  Subjects rated two stories with the RECS-K, "Kim" and "Jed" (from Narvaez, Gleason, Mitchell, & Bentley, 1999) and were asked to independently produce the theme of the stories.  The RECS-K contains 32 items, 8 in each subcategory of moral reasoning.  For each item, students were asked whether it was present in the story and were given the options "I don't think so," "I saw it," and "I saw it a lot."  These stories were created with the express intent of conveying an ethical theme.

Teachers in Catholic schools (graduates of the University of Notre Dame Alliance for Catholic Education program) were recruited to volunteer their classrooms for this study. Students (with parent permission) were recruited to participate. Participating classrooms ranged from grades 5-8 (ages 10-15) and included English, religion, social studies, history, and language arts classrooms.  Study participants included majority and minority students from schools located in Texas, California, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Florida.

This presentation will examine whether children are able to identify moral themes from these stories using the RECS-K.  Because children and adults may take away different messages from the same moral stories based on experience and cognitive and moral developmental levels, if the data prove to be significant, the RECS-K can serve as a tool for researchers to examine what understanding children gain from reading a moral story.

Powerpoint Slides (converted)

**Media is a powerful force in the lives of children**
■Socializing agent in the lives of children
■Negative effects documented
■Undermines the sense of trust in the world (violence is everywhere)
■Undermines the sense of control
■Emphasizes control through violence
■Alters the sense of purpose
■As consumerism

**Violent Media (TV, movies, video games)**
■Increase aggression (Strasberger & Wilson, 2002)
■Increase likelihood of violent thoughts and actions (C. Anderson)
■TV: Linked to behavior actions decades later (Huesmann et al, 2003)

**Children who watch a lot of violent television**
■May become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others
■May be more fearful of the world around them
■May be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.
*American Psychological Association*

**Ratings systems have been developed to monitor possible harmful influences on children**

•Typically negative ratings
•Focused on sex, violence, language
•Age-based advice
•Little detail

**Movie Ratings**
Motion Picture Association
G: General Audiences- All Ages Admitted
PG: Parental Guidance Suggested. Some Material May Not Be Suitable For Children
PG-13: Parents Strongly Cautioned. Some Material May Be Inappropriate For Children Under 13
R: Restricted, possibly including "hard language," "tough violence," nudity within sensual scenes, drug abuse or other elements, or a combination
NC-17: No One 17 And Under Admitted

**Television Parental Guidelines**
TVY: All Children
TVY7: age 7 and above
TVG: General Audience
TVPG: Parental Guidance Suggested, possible presence of  moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D),
TV14: Parents Strongly Cautioned, not for children under 14
TVMA: Mature Audience Only, which contains one or more instances of graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L), and is intended to be viewed by individuals over 17 years of age

**Common Sense Media**
■Ratings of films, music, literature
■Four Areas: Sexual Content, Language, Violence, and Content (e.g., humor, scariness, drugs, alcohol)
■Started by James Steyer, author of
    *The Other Parent*
■h<http://www.commonsensemedia.org/>

**The Rating Ethical Content System (RECS)**
RECS rates the *ethical* content in media and provides a *positive* rating
Value of RECS
■Standardized and practical
■Focused on positive ethicality
■Theoretically supported
■Non-partisan and culturally flexible
■Can be applied to many different media
■Experts and non-experts collaborate
Rating Ethical
Content System (RECS)

■Based on Rest's (1983) four-process model of ethical behavior
■What is involved in completing an ethical behavior?
■Ethical Sensitivity
■Ethical Judgment
■Ethical Focus
■Ethical Action

RECS Ethical Sensitivity
**Did the main characters in the story**
1. care about other characters' feelings?
2. notice what other characters' needs were?
3. notice things that were wrong or that hurt others?
4. show their feelings in a way that didn't hurt other characters or things?
5. listen to and take to heart what other characters said?
6. understand or try to understand other characters' thoughts and opinions?
7. understand or try to understand characters who were different or from different cultures?
8. act like a good friend?

RECS Ethical Judgment
**Did the main characters in the story**
1. understand or try to understand the problem before deciding what to do?
2. think about how others might be upset by their choices, actions or decisions?
3. think about doing the right thing?
4. think about their decisions afterwards?
5. follow or try to follow the rules?
6. Were the main characters in the story positive or optimistic about solving the problem?
7. try to do things that helped the neighborhood or community?
8. want things to be fair for everyone?

RECS Ethical Focus
**Did the main characters in the story**
1. show good self-control over their own behaviors?
2. work with other characters on moral goals?
3. Were the main characters in the story interested in helping others?
4. think they really could solve the problem or conflict?
5. follow through on promises and agreements?
6. Were the main characters in the story good, or did they try to be good and do the right thing even when it was easier to be bad?
7. try to be careful with resources?
8. try to be positive?

RECS Ethical Action
**Did the main characters in the story**
1. fix or try to fix problems or conflicts without hurting other characters or things?
2. When someone was picked on, try to stop it?
3. try to help other characters?

4. try to change rules that were unfair?
5. make a plan to solve a problem or conflict?
6. follow through on a moral goal even when something got in the way and plans were changed?
7. not give up on solving the problem or conflict even when it was hard?
8. Was the main characters in the story brave when helping others or solving a problem or conflict?

We present preliminary findings from an age comparison study

METHOD

■Participants were 93 middle school students, 36 undergraduates and 15 adults

They read two moral stories, generated a theme and rated the ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical motivation and ethical action represented in the story.

Materials
■Two moral stories from Narvaez, Gleason, Mitchell & Bentley (1999)
■Each story has a character facing an every day moral dilemma

Stories and Themes
■"Kim" was about a girl who gets too much change back when paying for the family's gas.
Theme: Be honest with strangers
■"Jed" was about a boy who had many chores to do but was tempted to go play with friends.
Theme: Complete your responsibilities even in the face of temptation

Participant Tasks
■Write the theme of the story
■Complete the RECS for each story

■Rate the story on each component
■Ethical Sensitivity
■Ethical Judgment
■Ethical Focus
■Ethical Action
■SCALE:
No evidence          I see it I see it a lot
              0                1                2
■Maximum points per component = 16

RESULTS

Theme Generation
■Percentage of participants who generated the correct themes of the stories

|  | Kim | Jed |
|---|---|---|
| Children | 84.9 | 67.0 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Undergrads | 96.7 | 86.7 |
| Adults | 93.3 (1 missed) | 93.3 |

Internal Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)

| | Kim | Jed |
|---|---|---|
| Moral Sensitivity | .72 | .69 |
| Moral Judgment | .72 | .68 |
| Moral Focus | .64 | .68 |
| Moral Action | .69 | **.52** |

KIM Mean Ratings (Standard Deviations & MANOVA Significance)

| | Sensitivity | Judgment | Focus | Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Children | 8.80 | 10.38 | 9.87 | 7.97 |
| | (3.05) | (2.85) | (2.65) | (2.83) |
| Undergr | 8.25 | 10.75 | 10.25 | 6.75 |
| | (2.75) | (2.53) | (2.07) | (2.35) |
| Adults | 9.40 | 10.80 | 9.93 | 8.47 |
| | (2.50) | (2.56) | (3.01) | (3.77) |
| | **ns** | **ns** | **ns** | **ns** |

JED Mean Ratings (Standard Deviations & MANOVA Significance)

| | Sensitivity | Judgment | Focus | Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Children | 8.70 | 8.55 | 8.09 | 6.98 |
| | (2.94) | (3.06) | (2.74) | (2.38) |
| Undergr | 9.22 | 9.36 | 9.11 | 7.56 |
| | (2.55) | (2.28) | (2.24) | (2.18) |
| Adults | 10.47 | 9.87 | 9.07 | 9.00 |
| | (2.50) | (3.02) | (3.01) | (3.25) |
| | **.07** | **ns** | **ns** | **.01** |

Children's Consistency Across Stories

(Significant at .05 or better)

| | K-Sens | K-Judg | K-Focus | K-Act | J-Sens | J-Judg | J-Focus | J-Act |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K-Sens | -- | .58 | .61 | .46 | **.36** | .29 | .20 | .23 |
| K-Judg | | -- | .67 | .52 | .23 | **.22** | .19 | .20 |
| K-Focus | | | -- | .54 | .40 | .27 | **.37** | .35 |
| K-Action | | | | -- | .30 | .18 | .27 | **.29** |
| J-Sens | | | | | -- | .55 | .56 | .36 |
| J-Judg | | | | | | -- | .59 | .43 |
| J-Focus | | | | | | | -- | .52 |

College Consistency Across Stories (Significant at .05 or better)

| | K-Sens | K-Judg | K-Focus | K-Act | J-Sens | J-Judg | J-Focus | J-Act |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K-Sens | -- | .71 | .49 | .34 ns | **.40** | .28 ns | .25 ns | .11 ns |
| K-Judg | | -- | .70 | .50 | .46 | **.36** | .26 ns | .04 ns |
| K-Focus | | | -- | .68 | .62 | .43 | **.39** | .24 ns |
| K-Action | | | | -- | .67 | .54 | .54 | **.52** |
| J-Sens | | | | | -- | .46 | .37 | .38 |
| J-Judg | | | | | | -- | .70 | .57 |
| J-Focus | | | | | | | -- | .67 |

Adult Consistency Across Stories (Significant at .05 or better)

| | K-Judg | K-Focus | K-Act | J-Sens | J-Judg | J-Focus | J-Act |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K-Sens-- | .75 | .82 | .86 | **.74** | .74 | .72 | .72 |
| K-Judg | -- | .84 | .86 | .78 | **.86** | .76 | .78 |
| K-Focus | | -- | .89 | .72 | .80 | **.88** | .85 |
| K-Action | | | -- | .74 | .82 | .80 | **.88** |
| J-Sens | | | | -- | .87 | .66 | .74 |
| J-Judg | | | | | -- | .86 | .74 |
| J-Focus | | | | | | -- | .79 |

## Discussion

- Mixed developmental trends
    - Low power
- Adults may be more consistent in noticing moral aspects
- Further research is required

For more information
- Center for Ethical Education University of Notre Dame
- http://cee.nd.edu
- dnarvaez@nd.edu