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Families need ethical axioms

By JASON BROWN
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It seems I can't watch the TV news without a bottle of Gravol nearby.

Parties where young men slip women drugs, university students surreptitiously broadcasting a roommate's private moments, PowerPoint presentations parading students' physical attributes along with their names, bullying leading to suicides — has the younger generation traded iPods for ethics?

How can they figure out the most complicated new technologies in a flash and yet be so unable to discern right from wrong?

I'm not saying all was great when I was growing up. To be sure, there was plenty of bullying. But the speed at which thoughts can be disseminated around the world now far exceeds the time spent on self-censoring those thoughts. And that, in my opinion, is a very bad thing.

I see the problem, as I do most things, through mathematically coloured glasses. One of the cornerstones in mathematics is logic, where you form a theory by taking a few rules, called axioms, for granted and the rest are simply deductions from them.

All the geometry you learned back in high school was a theory, proposed by the Greek mathematician Euclid, with only five axioms as a basis — obvious things like being able to join any two points by a line. All of two-dimensional geometry is what we can deduce from these statements.

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To me, any good ethical system should be just like a theory. You set up some unquestionable principles as axioms, and behaviour should be guided by what can be reasoned from these. The horrible stories in the news only highlight the fact that we cannot prescribe rules of good behaviour for every situation our children might encounter. Events and people change minute by minute, and we cannot foresee all.

What we can do is set down what our ethical axioms are, and teach our sons and daughters to refer to them when they need to figure out the right thing to do in a given situation.

So what should go on a list of ethical axioms? You want the rules to be specific enough to be relevant but sufficiently general that you don't need to carry many in your head. After all, Euclid only put forward five axioms for all of geometry.

Here are a few ethical axioms I stress with my own sons:

- Don't treat others in a way you wouldn't want to be treated yourself.
- Those different from you are entitled to respect, as everyone (including you!) is different from others in some way.
- Those closest to you deserve to be treated at least as well as strangers.
- Don't say, write or send anything you wouldn't want passed around.
- Health, safety and doing the right thing come before friendship.
- Under no circumstances is it OK to embarrass someone.
- Inaction makes you complicit.
- Don't joke to someone about something that is important to them.

That last one is something my mother often mentioned, and I am surprised at how many adults I have encountered who have run roughshod over that one, hurting those closest to them.

From axioms such as these, anyone should be able to reason that, for example, it shows poor judgment to "sext" nude photos of yourself, even to a boyfriend or girlfriend. And cyber bullying would contravene most, if not all, of the axioms listed.

In addition to creating your family's own ethical axioms, you need to practise ethical reasoning with your kids. Put forward some real and hypothetical situations and ask what they would do, based on the principles you have set out.

Because in the end, we can't always be there with them, so we need to trust their reasoning and their judgment.

Jason I. Brown is a professor of mathematics at Dalhousie University in Halifax. His research that used mathematics to uncover how the Beatles played the opening chord of A Hard Day's Night has garnered worldwide attention. He is also the author of Our Days Are Numbered: How Mathematics Orders Our Lives.

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