

The two worlds of kids' morals

March 2 2009

Children's moral behavior and attitudes in the real world largely carry over to the virtual world of computers, the Internet, video games and cell phones. Interestingly, there are marked gender and race differences in the way children rate morally questionable virtual behaviors, according to Professor Linda Jackson and her team from Michigan State University in the US. Their research is the first systematic investigation of the effects of gender and race on children's beliefs about moral behavior, both in the virtual world and the real world, and the relationship between the two. The study was published online in Springer's journal, *Sex Roles*.

Jackson and her team asked 515 12-year-old children (one-third African American, two-thirds Caucasian American) to fill in a written questionnaire looking at their moral behaviors and attitudes in the real world, and their view of morally questionable behavior in the virtual world. Measures of moral behavior in the real world included whether or not children had lied to parents and/or teachers, whether they had ever cheated, and whether they had ever bullied someone. Examples of morally questionable behavior in the virtual world were sending emails with threats, using sexually explicit or violent language in chat rooms and/or in text messages, hacking computers, and violence in video games.

Overall, African American children were more caring and more flexible about rules when personal goals were at stake than Caucasian American children. More specifically, Caucasian American girls and African American boys and girls viewed morality in the real world from the perspective of the individual's well-being. In contrast, Caucasian

American boys' morality in the real world was more rule-based.

When it came to rating virtual behaviors, African American children were more likely than Caucasian American children to find acceptable virtual behaviors that result in real-world harm, for example emailing friends answers in advance of tests or sending text messages during class. The African American children were also more likely to find viewing online pornography acceptable.

For all groups, morality in the real world was related to morality in the virtual world. In other words, the more important good moral character in the real world was, the less acceptable morally questionable virtual behaviors were. There were however some race differences. African American children found some virtual behaviors that might advance individual goals in the real world more acceptable than did Caucasian American children. In contrast, the morality of Caucasian American boys, and to a lesser extent girls, was more rule-based in the virtual world.

The frequency of exposure to information technology also had an effect. The more children used the Internet, the more they found invasion of privacy online, videogame violence and online pornography acceptable.

The authors conclude that: "Educational interventions that are culturally sensitive need to be developed to assure that all children, regardless of race or gender, understand that certain virtual behaviors are unacceptable and in fact may be psychologically harmful, such as video game violence, or physically dangerous, like contacting strangers online."

More information: Jackson LA et al (2009). Gender, race and morality in the virtual world and its relationship to morality in the real world. Sex Roles DOI 10.1007/s11199-009-9589-5

Source: Springer

Citation: The two worlds of kids' morals (2009, March 2) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-03-worlds-kids-morals.html>

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