

Portraits of Early Moral Sensibility in Two Children's Everyday Conversations

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Two children's conversations with adults were examined for reference to moral issues using transcripts of archived at-home family talk from the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) database (MacWhinney, 2000). Through target words (e.g., good, wrong, mean) in transcripts of two children between ages 2.5 and 5.0 years, 1,333 moral conversations were identified. Conversations were examined for whether and when children discussed moral issues, how they used moral words (e.g., to communicate feelings, ask for reasons, etc.), what was discussed and in what contexts, and whether children were active or passive contributors. The resulting case study portraits of early moral sensibility extend and challenge extant findings, revealing substantive differences between the two children's moral sensibilities as well as commonalities, including a tendency to be active rather than passive in moral conversation, to focus on the dispositions/behaviors of others, and to engage in moral conversation primarily to give/ask for reasons, communicate feelings, and (dis)approve.

Research has revealed much about the moral life of young children. We have learned that even young children distinguish between moral and social/conventional rules (Killen, 1991; Smetana, 1983; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Turiel, 1983), feel empathy and engage in prosocial behaviors toward others (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hoffman, 2000; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979), are aware of

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household rules and standards (Dunn, 1987; Lamb, 1991), engage in tattling (den Bak & Ross, 1996) and other forms of conflict resolution (Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos, 2002; Rinaldi & Howe, 2003), and are interested in issues of distributive justice (Damon, 1977). These are important discoveries, yet we still lack a comprehensive portrayal of early moral life from the child's perspective. What are the salient features of a young child's daily moral landscape? Is a young child concerned from day to day with the wide range of issues that concern adults, such as justice, empathy, prosocial action, virtues, and principles, or are the child's issues more limited? Does the moral landscape, viewed in this way, change during early childhood? Does it differ between individuals and between contexts? We have yet to explore the broad topography of a single child's early moral sensibility in this way.

The area of moral development arguably lacks the case study—style portrayals that have figured historically in other areas of psychological development, but a potential window on early moral sensibility is children's conversation, substantial collections of which are now readily available in computerized databases. And although caution is warranted in assuming that talk mirrors understanding, recent investigations in other areas of social cognition have demonstrated not only that young children understand much about interpersonal communication (e.g., Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Garvey & Hogan, 1973) but also that exploration of children's earliest utterances can reveal much about their interests and beliefs (e.g., Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Dunn, 1987; Hickling & Wellman, 2001). Insofar as conversation is an effective medium for socialization (Miller, 1994; Miller & Hoogstra, 1992; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), it seems likely that children's conversations about moral issues constitute an important window on early moral sensibility, just as they have provided insights into other aspects of children's social cognition, such as their understanding of mental states (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995), of causation in human behavior (Hickling & Wellman, 2001), of emotion (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002), and of the distinction between reality and appearance (Woolley & Wellman, 1990).

To be sure, researchers of early moral development have also employed natural language analysis. For instance, examinations of parent-child conversations have shown that by 2 years of age, children openly communicate about obligation and blame with respect to both others' feelings and familial/social rules (Dunn, 1987), that they focus more on others' (e.g., a sibling's) transgression than their own (Dunn & Munn, 1986; Ross & den Bak-Lammers, 1998), and that bringing the parent's attention to such transgressions, both to receive parental support and to enforce social/moral standards, increases in the preschool years (den Bak & Ross, 1996). Yet although

parent-child conversations have been examined for evidence concerning the development of specific moral phenomena—for example, tattling between siblings (den Bak & Ross, 1996) and awareness of social/moral standards (Dunn 1987; Lamb, 1991)—they have been less frequently studied with regard to early moral sensibility, generally speaking. Snow's (1987) pioneering analysis of one child's moral use of three target words (good, bad, should) from 2.6 to 6.1 years old most closely approximates what we have in mind. Snow's analysis showed, among other things, that "good" and "bad" were used in moral contexts to refer to human actions (e.g., "that was a good thing to do"), human spiritual states (e.g., "you're being a good boy"), and products of the human mind (e.g., "those are bad ideas"). Specifically, the semantic domains that seemed most morally salient were good/bad people, good/bad ideas, and good/bad words. Yet Snow's investigation was preliminary in several respects, analyzing only three target words as they appeared in the conversations of one child and employing a coding scheme that targeted three primary questions: who introduces morality as a topic of conversation, how frequent such conversations are, and how much information parents provide children about moral issues.

There is much yet to be learned about young children's awareness (and negotiation) of the moral domain through an in-depth exploration of their earliest adult-child conversations. The extant questions are many: What moral issues do young children notice and talk about (e.g., feelings, welfare/needs, rules/standards, obedience, principles)? What sorts of "moral" words (e.g., good, bad, right, wrong) do they use, and how do they use them (e.g., to disapprove, to ask for reasons, to elicit sympathy)? How do young children engage in conversations about moral issues, that is, do children introduce moral issues for discussion or simply respond to adult leads? And finally, do children's moral arena change over time? To begin to address these questions, we conducted a longitudinal exploration of two young children's everyday moral discourse. In focusing on two children, we limited our ability to generalize beyond them and aimed instead to achieve for each child a portrait, both comprehensive and in-depth, of early moral sensibility.

Method

Overview and Rationale

We examined archived transcripts for two children, Abe (Kuczaj, 1976) and Sarah (Brown, 1973), from the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) on-line database (MacWhinney, 2000), a collection of natural-language transcripts contributed by numerous researchers. We focused on

the at-home conversations of these two children, sampled periodically between ages 2 and 5 years. To locate conversations about moral issues in an efficient manner, we followed other researchers (e.g., Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Hickling & Wellman, 2001; Snow, 1987) in first identifying target words (e.g., good, bad, right, wrong, kind, mean) and then examining a window of conversation centered on each target word use. This method, although efficient, is adequate only insofar as the target words successfully pinpoint the conversations of interest. To ensure an adequate index, we undertook an extensive preliminary study to select the relevant target words utilizing transcripts from several children from the database.

Target Word Selection

Defining moral conversations. As our primary aim was to describe the breadth and depth of two individual children's early moral sensibility, we assumed a broad definition of morality. We chose target words that would index conversations involving reference to the well-being of (or harm to) individuals, animals, or objects; to people's qualities, dispositions, or actions related to such well-being (or harm); and to rules, expectations, reasons for, or feelings about such issues.

Selecting words. Guided by this broad construal of morality, we began our search for target words by reading samples of transcripts for three children (representing ages 2–5 years) selected from the CHILDES database: Abe (Kuczaj, 1976), Adam (Brown, 1973), and Nathan (contributed by Catherine Snow). Transcripts reflecting approximately one month's worth of recorded discussion within each six-month period were reviewed by the first author (amounting to 185 single-spaced pages of transcripts for Abe, 240 for Nathan, and 287 for Adam). Conversations pertinent to moral issues, as defined above, were noted in these transcripts, and child and adult uses of key moral words (e.g., good/bad, right/wrong, nice/mean, friend, etc.) were identified. This preliminary reading resulted in a list of potential target moral words to which we added words that we encountered in other moral development studies and children's literature as well as a few suggested to us by colleagues. The resulting list contained 98 potential target words (see Appendix). To facilitate later description of what aspects of morality featured in children's early moral sensibility, we grouped these words loosely (although not necessarily exclusively) into the following categories: words indicating moral evaluation (e.g., good, bad, right, wrong); moral (deontic) expectations/obligations (e.g., should, must, rule); moral emotions/internal states (e.g., love, sympathy, shame); moral actions (e.g., hit, hurt, help); moral traits/virtues (e.g., brave, gentle, honest); and other (e.g., war, peace,

gift). Having identified key words for flagging discussions concerning a range of moral issues, we conducted frequency analyses of child and adult uses of all forms of each word (e.g., love, loved, loves, loving) in the transcripts from Abe and Sarah. Words not employed in either set of transcripts were dropped from the target word list. The final list consisted of 77 words, which were used 12,343 times across both sets of transcripts (see Appendix).

Children Selected for Study

Abe (Kuczaj, 1976) and Sarah (Brown, 1973) were the children whose transcripts from the CHILDES database were selected for a comprehensive examination. Abe's corpora included 210 transcribed audiotaped at-home conversations, recorded by Abe's father during 1973–1975, 1 hour per week from 2.4 to 4.0 years and one-half hour per week from 4.1 to 5.0 years. Sarah's corpora included 139 transcribed audiotaped at-home conversations, recorded by researchers present on site between 1963 and 1966 for one-half hour once or twice a week. Both children were first-born (and, at least for the period coded, had no siblings) and Caucasian. Abe was from a graduate school student family, and Sarah from a working-class family. Sarah's transcripts had a lower child-to-adult talk percentage (child 35%, adult 65%) than Abe's (child 57%, adult 43%). In addition, Sarah and Abe differed in the mean length of utterance (MLU) calculated for the periods of 33–36 months (2.3 vs. 6.0, respectively) and 45–48 months (3.2 vs. 8.0, respectively). We selected these two children because they were native English speakers representing individual differences in demographic and conversational characteristics (as noted above) and because their transcripts contained primarily parent-child (as opposed to researcher-child) at-home conversations extensively representing children as they aged from 2.5 years to 5.0 years.

Procedure

Target word excerpts. Transcripts were submitted to a computerized search for adult and child uses of the 77 target words, a procedure that generated conversation excerpts containing a window of conversation centered on a target word line—as exemplified below (emphasis on target word line)—for each line in the transcripts that contained a target word. Preliminary coding attempts established the 5-line window size as sufficient for coders to accurately identify target words being used in moral contexts.

Abe: He got yellow feet.

Father: That's right . . . the camel has yellow feet.

Abe: *And toes I don't wan[t] [t]a hurt him.*

Father: Ok . . . you don't have to hurt him Abe . . . the alligator which the donkey kicked is crying; tell me who's crying.

Abe: Alligator's crying.

Coding scheme. Coders first distinguished between moral and non-moral (e.g., *good* cookies, one's *right* foot) uses of target words. Only target word uses coded as appearing in a moral conversation (hereafter termed either "moral word" or "moral conversations," depending on context) underwent the second phase of coding, which involved six categories designed to characterize the identified moral conversations.

First, we coded each moral word use for speaker (i.e., who used the moral word, mother, father, other adult, or child).

Second, we coded for use, attempting to characterize how the moral conversation was employed. The coding options, which were not mutually exclusive, were to (a) instruct/model (e.g., Abe, 2.6 years: "Uhhuh you show Mike you get happy"), (b) approve/disapprove (Sarah, 3.2 years: "My cousin hit me and she's a bad girl"), (c) give/ask for reasons (Abe, 3.10 years: "Because he's nice to nice people"), (d) motivate/confirm/deny obedience (Abe, 3.11 years: "You could you could have put it on the floor for me. I asked you so you should have done it"), (e) communicate feelings (Abe, 4.8 years: "She doesn't like Pudgy a bit. I don't because he is so mean"), (f) motivate/engage in perspective-taking (Sarah, 3.9 years: "These hits hurts for you"), and (g) elicit/express sympathy (Sarah, 4.2 years: "I hope I don't hurt it" [a tree]).

Third, we coded for reference, noting what topics and situational features the speaker indicated were of moral relevance. The coding options, not mutually exclusive, were (a) feelings of speaker (Abe, 3.1 years: "Don't do that then I will get sad" [father threatens to beat up bunny]), (b) feelings of another (Abe, 3.4 years: "I'm picking up mine because I want you to be happy"), (c) welfare/needs of speaker (Abe, 2.10 years: "It did hurt me then. It doesn't hurt me now"), (d) welfare/needs of another (Abe, 2.4 years: "He got yellow feet and toes I don't want ta hurt him"), (e) disposition/behavior of speaker (Abe, 3.0 years: "I will I'm a mean cowboy I'm gon ta shoot you bang!"), (f) disposition/behavior of another (Abe, 2.9 years: "Because they are very nice"), (g) damage to goods/property (Abe, 3.4 years: "Glue it on that would be a really good idea poor bunny he really hops right on his head and he just got broken"), (h) principles (Abe, 3.6 years: [in response to father's "They shouldn't have bombs should they?"] "Because bombs hurt people"), (i) (dis)approval of speaker (Sarah, 4.4 years: "He bad bad boy"), (j) (dis)approval of another (Abe, 4.11 years: "My Mom would say 'Abe

Duncan'! You should be ashamed of yourself and I'm gon [t]a get you for real Abe Duncan"), (k) laws/rules/standards (Abe, 4.5 years: "Only if he does something bad then he gets under arrest"), and (l) obedience/punishment (Sarah, 2.6 years: "I bad get bump" [bump = spanking]). Unlike coding for use, reference coding required that the speaker refer explicitly to one or more of the coding options (e.g., explicitly mention of the feelings of another). Thus, a speaker might be coded for "motivating/confirming/denying obedience" in the use category but not for reference to "obedience/punishment" unless he explicitly referred to obedience/punishment (e.g., "You should do it" might be coded as being used to motivate obedience without being coded for explicitly referring to obedience).

Fourth, we coded for motivation, distinguishing between appeals to internal motivation (e.g., appeals to empathy or conscience) and appeals to external motivation (e.g., appeals to authority or punishment). Appeals considered internally motivating concerned (a) the speaker's own feelings, (b) the welfare/needs/feelings of others, and (c) a principle, such as justice, fairness, or kindness. Externally motivating appeals invoked (a) the approval/disapproval of others, (b) laws/rules/standards, (c) obedience or punishment, and (d) damage to goods/property.

Fifth, we coded for child role (passive or active). To be passive, the child must have used the moral word directly after the adult in a mimicking fashion, referred back to the adult in her or his use, or otherwise responded directly to some form of instruction from the adult (Mother: "Are you a good girl?"; Sarah, 2.5 years: "I a good girl"). Active role was coded when the child exhibited either creative thinking, reflecting a novel use, for instance, in pretend play or storytelling that involved moral relevance (Abe, 4.0 years: "and the knight was so good to the dragons the knight decided to make friends with the dragons"), or independent reasoning about a moral issue (Abe, 2.11 years: "I think they are mean to that man because they put him in that glue"). Instances not clearly active or passive were coded as indeterminate. Initial coding resulted in more than a third of instances being judged as indeterminate, so the data were coded again using larger conversation windows (including ten lines above and five below the target word line), which resulted in 90% active/passive judgments. This category was distinct from the use category (described above) in that a child could be coded as giving/asking for reasons without being coded as active, just as he or she could be coded as actively reasoning about an issue without specifically giving/asking for reasons.

Finally, we coded for context of use, that is, whether moral conversation was context-specific (Abe, 3.6 years: "Where I was throwing rocks across the street. I didn't hit anybody") or context-general (Sarah, 4.11

years: “Oh Betty’s always bad”), essentially capturing the distinction between nongeneric (“my bird flies”) and generic (“birds fly”) statements (see Gelman, 2003).

Reliability. The first author coded all target word excerpts, and a second coder independently coded 25%, analyzing every fourth page of the conversation segments for every target word for both children across all ages. Reliability was assessed first with regard to the moral versus nonmoral distinction: agreement was 95.3% for Abe and 95.1% for Sarah (Cohen’s $\kappa = .75$ and $.82$, respectively). Only instances judged by both coders as moral uses were subjected to the second phase of coding. Reliabilities for the second-phase coding categories were as follows for Abe and Sarah, respectively: speaker, 100%, 100%; use, 95% ($\kappa = .90$), 93% ($\kappa = .85$); child role, 97% ($\kappa = .83$), 94% ($\kappa = .75$); reference, 94% ($\kappa = .83$), 89% ($\kappa = .68$); motivation, 91% ($\kappa = .85$), 88% ($\kappa = .80$); and context, 92% ($\kappa = .84$), 93% ($\kappa = .82$). Disagreements were resolved in discussion between coders.

Retrospective Coding of Moral Conversations

Following the coding described above, we conducted a final comprehensive check on whether our target words adequately indexed moral conversations. A coder wholly unfamiliar with the project was given the above definition of morality and was instructed to read through transcripts from the end of each 6-month period for each child (18 of 210 transcripts for Abe, 8 of 136 transcripts for Sarah) and to tag all conversations of moral relevance based on this broad construal. No other instructions were given. We compared the independently flagged conversations to our coded excerpts. For Abe, the novice coder flagged 89.1% of the 46 moral word uses identified through the target word analysis and only two additional moral conversations that did not contain our target words. For Sarah, the coder flagged 85.4% of the 62 moral word uses identified through the target word analysis and four more moral conversations not containing target words. In addition, the full transcripts for both children at ages 2.0 and 5.0 years were read through entirely. All coded and no additional moral conversations were identified.

Results

To obtain in-depth characterizations of two children’s early moral sensibility, we analyzed our data with the aims of learning what moral issues each child talked about and in what contexts, which words were employed (and how), which recognized facets of morality were salient, and whether each child initiated or merely responded to moral discourse. To the extent

afforded by limited longitudinal samples, we also explored developmental trends in each area.

In order to draw comparisons between the two children and within children across ages, we needed a common baseline from which to view data derived from transcripts varying in length and number. In what follows, depending on the particular analysis, we elected to view specific word uses as a proportion of the total number of utterances or total number of moral word uses. Analyses were conducted first on data from each child and then on data from the adults in each child's data set for purposes of comparison. Within each topic area, we first present results concerning children's conversational contributions followed by adult results where relevant.

Use of Target Words Overall and in Moral Conversation

The 77 target words appeared in moral conversations 1,333 times. Abe's transcripts contained 493 moral conversations (with Abe using the target words in 235 of these), and Sarah's contained 840 (with Sarah using the target words in 247). Information about these conversations shown as a proportion of total utterances is provided in Table 1. As shown, moral conversations were evident in the earliest transcripts of each child (Abe: 2.4 years; Sarah: 2.3 years). Abe used target words in 63 moral conversations before 3 years of age; for Sarah it was 96 uses. During Abe's 4th year, his moral use of target words had nearly doubled; for Sarah, it had dropped down to 73 uses.

Interestingly, moral references decreased as a proportion of total utterances with age (Figure 1). Specifically, when children's moral word uses (summed across 6-month intervals between 2 and 5 years) were viewed as a proportion of total child utterances, correlations with age for Abe and Sarah were $r_s = -.58$ and $-.85$, respectively. (All r_s reported have $p_s < .05$, unless otherwise stated.) A similar pattern was observed in the adult data (see Figure 1). With total utterances as the baseline, the correlation between child's age and adult moral use in Abe's transcripts (hereafter, Abe's adults) was $r = -.73$, $p = .06$, and for Sarah's adults it was $r = -.89$.

Because the number of uses in the 5th year were quite low, unless otherwise stated all developmental analyses in what follows report only those relations that remained significant when 5th-year uses were excluded.

Use of Different Types of Moral Words

To find out more about the nature and content of children's moral conversations, we examined the frequency of children's and adult's moral uses of particular target words.

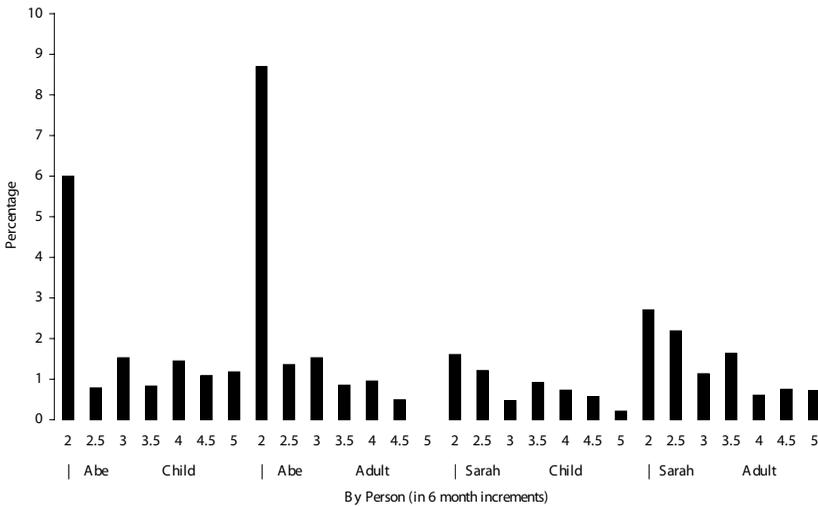


Figure 1. Percentage of Moral Uses by Number of Utterances for Children and Adults

Target word categories. Using the loose categories by which we initially grouped the target words, we observed that evaluative and action words constituted nearly a third of moral uses each (except for Sarah's adults, for whom evaluative words made up half), followed by emotion words that comprised 8–17% of moral word uses. Deontic and other words were rare, especially for children, and virtue words were even rarer and never used by either Abe or Sarah.

Frequency and order of specific word use. We examined the frequency of use of specific words within each category for each child (see Appendix). Overall, the five target words most frequently used in moral conversation were for Abe “mean,” “friend,” “nice,” “help,” and “hurt” and for Sarah “bad,” “hate,” “love,” “hit,” and “better.” For Abe, the first target words appearing in a moral context were “nice,” “hurt,” and “kiss” at age 2.4 years (e.g., “he got yellow feet and toes I don’t want ta hurt him”). By 3.0, Abe had used 30 of the 77 target words in a moral context. Sarah’s first target words used in a moral context were “good,” “bad,” “poor,” “cry,” and “kiss” at 2.4 years (e.g., “poor Donna crying”). By 3.0 years, she had used 18 target words in a moral context, and by 3.5 she had used 19.

To explore adults’ contributions to these early moral conversations, we conducted comparable analyses of adult use of target words in moral contexts (see Appendix). Overall, the five words used most in moral conversation by Abe’s adults were “nice,” “good,” “help,” “friend,” and “hurt”; the top five for Sarah’s adults were “poor,” “good,” “nice,” “hit,” and “bad.”

Abe's mother's first target words in these samples were "cry," "good," "happy," "help," and "hope"; Abe's father's were "hurt," "kick," "cry," "give," and "nice." Abe's adults used, in total, 37 of the 77 target words in moral contexts (Abe used 41). Sarah's mother's first target words were "poor," "love," "good," "spank," and "cry"; Sarah's father's were "bad," "suppose," "kiss," "give," and "sorry." Sarah's adults used, in total, 43 of the 77 in a moral context (Sarah used 34).

Moral Word Use

We next examined how moral words were used by each child and his or her adult conversation partners (Table 2). Recall that each instance could be coded as having more than one objective, for example, to communicate feelings and to (dis)approve. As Table 2 indicates, whether viewed as absolute frequencies or as a proportion of all target moral word uses, Abe used moral words in conversation most often to give/ask for reasons and to communicate feelings. Sarah used them most frequently to (dis)approve and to give/ask for reasons. Abe's adults used the words primarily to give/ask for reasons, (dis)approve, and motivate/confirm/deny obedience. Sarah's adults most frequently aimed to motivate/confirm/deny obedience and to (dis)approve.

Children's uses of moral words in conversation changed with age (compared over 6-month intervals from 2 years to 4.5 years) in some respects. Relative to his overall moral word uses, Abe's use of moral words to instruct/model and to give/take reasons increased significantly with age ($r_s = .92$ and $.90$, respectively), while his use of words to communicate feelings decreased ($r = -.88$). Sarah's use of moral words to give/ask for reasons increased significantly with age ($r = .98$), while her use of words to express/elicit sympathy and engage in perspective taking decreased ($r_s = -.79$ and $-.81$, respectively). As Abe got older, his adults used moral words significantly less to communicate feelings and express/elicit sympathy ($r_s = -.77$ and $-.85$, respectively). As Sarah aged, her adults used words significantly less to (dis)approve and express/elicit sympathy ($r_s = -.66$ and $-.71$, respectively); they used words more to give/ask for reasons ($r = .79$).

Following previous research (e.g., Dunn, 1987), we looked for developmental relations between adult and child uses across time (i.e., whether the frequency of adult and child concurrent uses, viewed as a proportion of the respective speaker's overall moral uses in 6-month intervals, were correlated). Between the ages of 2 years and 4.5 years, Abe's use to instruct/model was negatively correlated with his parents' instruction/modeling ($r = -.76$): as the frequency of Abe's instruction/modeling over time increased,

Table 2. Child and Adult Uses of Moral Words

Use	Abe #		Sarah #		Adults (Abe)		Adults (Sarah)		% of Moral Use
	of Uses	% of Moral Use	of Uses	% of Moral Use	# of Uses	% of Moral Use	# of Uses	% of Moral Use	
(Dis)approve	55	23.40%	123	49.80%	106	41.10%	304	51.30%	
Communicate feelings	99	42.10%	73	29.60%	92	35.70%	140	23.60%	
Express sympathy	18	7.70%	22	8.90%	48	18.60%	168	28.30%	
Give reasons/explain	144	61.30%	100	40.50%	121	46.90%	198	33.40%	
Instruct/model	62	26.40%	27	10.90%	47	18.20%	196	33.10%	
Obedience	52	22.10%	58	23.50%	104	40.30%	331	55.80%	
Perspective taking	33	14.00%	25	10.10%	54	20.90%	166	28.00%	

the frequency of his parents' instruction/modeling decreased. Sarah's communication of feelings was positively correlated with her parents' ($r = .82$). No other significant concurrent relationships were revealed. We also compared children's uses to adult uses 6 months earlier (again compared over 6-month intervals). Only one significant relationship emerged: Abe's use to instruct/model was again negatively correlated with his parents' prior use ($r = -.90$).

Content of Moral Word Reference

Table 3 summarizes data concerning what children and adults talked about when they used moral words in conversations. Children referred most frequently to the disposition/behavior of another. For example, Abe, age 2.11 years, said, "I think they are mean to that man," and Sarah, age 3.2 years, said, "he's a bad bear". Abe's next most frequent references were to the disposition/behavior of speaker and to the feelings of speaker. Sarah's next most frequent references were to (dis)approval of speaker and to obedience/punishment. Reference to rules/laws and principles were least frequent.

We examined changes as a function of children's age in the frequency of these moral topics, viewed as a proportion of total moral uses (again compared over 6-month intervals from 2 years to 4.5 years). Significant effects were found only in a decrease in Abe's references to (dis)approval of speaker, which was negatively correlated with age ($r = -.92$) and a decrease in Sarah's references to her own needs/welfare, also negatively correlated with age ($r = -.91$).

Like children, adults talked mostly about the disposition/behavior of another. The next most frequently discussed topics for Abe's adults were the (dis)approval of speaker and the welfare of another; for Sarah's adults, obedience/punishment, the welfare of another, and the (dis)approval of speaker were the next most frequently discussed topics. Over time, Abe's adults discussed other's feelings less ($r = -.81$), whereas Sarah's adults referenced other's (dis)approval more ($r = .88$).

An investigation of adult-child reference type correlations between 2 years and 4.5 years revealed significant positive relations between Sarah's and her adults' concurrent references to the speaker's feelings ($r = .90$), laws ($r = .91$), and principles ($r = .84$) and between Abe's and his adults' reference to others' feelings ($r = .59$), behavior/dispositions ($r = .78$), and obedience and punishment ($r = .97$). Significant correlations between adults' reference types and children's assessed 6 months later emerged for Abe with regard to reference to his self-welfare ($r = .90$) and for Sarah with regard to expressing her own (dis)approval ($r = -.88$).

Table 3. Children's Types of Moral Reference

Use	Abe # of Uses	% of Moral Use	Sarah # of Uses	% of Moral Use	Adults (Abe) # of Uses	% of Moral Use	Adults (Sarah) # of Uses	% of Moral Use
(Dis)approval of another	17	7.20%	17	6.90%	10	3.90%	39	6.60%
(Dis)approval of speaker	36	15.30%	91	36.80%	82	31.80%	225	37.90%
Damage of property	19	8.10%	7	2.80%	10	3.90%	32	5.40%
Disposition/behavior of another	151	64.30%	148	59.90%	193	74.80%	484	81.60%
Disposition/behavior of speaker	78	33.20%	72	29.10%	35	13.60%	45	7.60%
Feelings of another	45	19.10%	18	7.30%	61	23.60%	108	18.20%
Feelings of speaker	69	29.40%	51	20.60%	46	17.80%	27	4.60%
Obedience/punishment	29	12.30%	87	35.20%	35	13.60%	283	47.70%
Principles	2	0.90%	1	0.40%	7	2.70%	7	1.20%
Rules/laws	5	2.10%	2	0.80%	11	4.30%	11	1.90%
Standards/expectations	10	4.30%	22	8.90%	14	5.40%	93	15.70%
Welfare of another	68	28.90%	63	25.50%	77	29.80%	235	39.60%
Welfare of speaker	15	6.40%	40	16.20%	11	4.30%	13	2.20%

Table 4. Child's Passive and Active Uses

Child Role	Abe		Sarah	
	Total # of Uses	% of Total	Total # of Uses	% of Total
Passive	20	8.51%	57	23.08%
Active	194	82.55%	152	61.54%
Indeterminate	21	8.94%	38	15.38%
Total	235		247	

Of all moral word uses by children, about half explicitly referred to a source of motivation (121 for Abe, 103 for Sarah). Of these, the majority (86% for Abe, 66% for Sarah) referred to internal motivation. With age, Abe referred increasingly to external motivation ($r = .78$), while Sarah referred increasingly to internal motivation ($r = .86$). Although Abe's references to internal motivation dropped over time, they remained dominant (70% or more of motivation references). For Sarah, references to internal and external motivation stayed roughly equal, with internal motivation references increasing slightly between 4 and 5 years old. Comparatively, the adults also made explicit reference to a source of motivation about 40–45% of the time (116 Abe's parents, 242 Sarah's parents). Of these, Abe's parents referred to internal motivation 71% of the time. Sarah's parents referred to internal motivation only 45% of the time, with these references decreasing significantly over time ($r = -.75$).

Active versus Passive Roles in Moral Conversations

Table 4 displays information concerning whether children were active (i.e., reflecting the child's creative use of the moral word or active reasoning about a moral issue) or passive (as in obvious repetition or imitation of adult use) in conversations in which they used a target word in a moral context. More than 80% of Abe's uses were active, less than 10% were passive, and the remainder were coded as indeterminate. In comparison, 60% of Sarah's uses were coded as active, less than 25% were passive, and the rest were indeterminate. No relationships between child's role and age were detected.

Context-Specific versus. Context-General References

Both Abe and Sarah made more context-specific references (55% and 71% of total moral word uses, respectively) than context-general references

(38% and 24%, respectively). These proportions were roughly sustained over time for both children. All adults also made more context-specific than context-general references (Abe's adults: 59% vs. 35%, respectively; Sarah's adults: 79% vs. 16%, respectively).

Discussion

In examining two children's at-home conversations, we aspired to obtain detailed case study descriptions of early moral sensibility, specifically, what moral issues were discussed more and less frequently, for what purposes, and whether the two children actively initiated moral conversation or were primarily passive. In studying only two children who were recorded in the constrained context of at-home conversation with parents, we were limited in our ability to generalize the findings to other children and even to these children in other contexts (e.g., teacher and peer interactions). Nonetheless, our data offer us two detailed portraits of comprehensive early moral sensibility.

In treating conversation as a window on moral life, we join others (e.g., Bhatia, 2000; Dunn, 1987; Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Lamb, 1991; Snow, 1987) in documenting that young children do engage in conversations about moral issues. Bloom, Lightbown, and Hood (1975) reported that children use moral language—words such as “good,” “bad,” “naughty,” and “nice”—as early as 19 months. Our study of two children as they aged from 2 to 5 years identified 1,333 moral uses of target words, confirming that these children conversed with their parents many times about moral issues. Because we first located child and adult uses of carefully selected target words and subsequently judged each use as appearing in a moral or non-moral conversation, our method was stringent and yet inclusive. We limited our examination to discussions that genuinely addressed moral issues yet ranged across a broad spectrum of such issues. Retrospective perusal of full transcript samples confirmed that we captured most conversations pertaining to moral issues.

Beyond documenting that both Abe and Sarah engaged in moral conversation, our data showed that they talked about some moral issues and not about others. For example, although neither Abe nor Sarah talked much about moral rules, standards, or principles, both frequently evaluated the goodness and badness of people and their behaviors, a finding in accord with Snow's (1987) pioneering examination of Ross's use of terms such as “good” and “bad.” In making moral evaluations, Abe and Sarah appealed primarily to their own and others' feelings and welfare. Both remarked on obedience and punishment as well as on external motivations, although

Abe did so less than Sarah and both did so less than their parents. Sarah, more than Abe, expressed (dis)approval and referred to her own welfare; Abe referred more to others' feelings. Such findings are in line with Snow's report that Ross used moral words to both communicate feelings and express (dis)approval. Abe contributed more actively to moral conversation than Sarah and appealed more to internal motivations, a finding at odds, albeit for only two children, with extant reports suggesting that girls, more than boys, talk about feelings with adults (e.g., Dunn, 1987). Likewise, Abe's adults talked more about feelings than did Sarah's adults.

As Figure 1 indicates, within the age span we investigated the highest level of moral word use, relative to talk in general, occurred at 2 years and then declined over time, more rapidly for Abe than for Sarah. Of course, this decline was relative to the total number of utterances and, although perhaps counterintuitive, is not obviously in conflict with the well-documented moral developments of this period. The decline could reflect that utterances overall by both children increased over time at a higher rate than moral references, but this would not account for the similar change in the adults, whose overall utterances remained stable. It seems more likely, therefore, to reflect something else, perhaps something like the so-called terrible twos in which the child's increasing autonomy, mobility, and active participation in the world brings on a sudden burst of self-assertion (Bullock & Lutkenhaus, 1989, 1990) and parent-child conflict during the early toddler years (Dunn, 1988; Laible & Thompson, 2002) and inevitably leads (as any parent can attest) to the need for many adult-child conversations about moral issues. In addition, perhaps the young child's newfound awareness of moral constraints (as well as parents' desire to cultivate such awareness) creates an environment for early discussion that gradually becomes less central in daily parent-child discussions. We hope that future research will further illuminate this issue.

In terms of overall moral word use, we found that both children and adults used evaluative words (most commonly "good," "bad," "nice," and "mean") in moral conversation more than any other word type. Over a third of conversations involved moral evaluations of some person, thing, attitude, behavior, or outcome. And, considering that even young children are sensitive to the criteria for evaluating prosocial interactions (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Wellman, Larkey, & Somerville, 1979), it is not surprising that action words were also used to discuss morally relevant behaviors (mainly helping, hurting, and hitting) in nearly a third of conversations. Less frequently, emotion words were also used: in Abe's family, primarily to communicate about loving someone or something as well as to acknowledge regret for ("I'm sorry") and/or anger about wrongdoings, and in Sarah's family, almost

exclusively to communicate about loving someone or something (although Sarah also “hated” people and things a lot too). Other research on adult-child discussion of emotions with regard to moral issues (e.g., Brown & Dunn, 1996; Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1996; Dunn, 1987; Dunn et al., 1987; Dunn & Munn, 1986; Laible & Thompson, 2000) has shown that higher frequencies of emotion and internal-state talk predict later levels of moral awareness and prosocial behavior as well as higher levels of constructive conflict resolution (Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos, 2002), suggesting an important role for emotion concepts in moral discourse.

For both children and adults, “good” and “bad” were used often to communicate about moral issues, but “right” and “wrong” were not, although they appeared in nonmoral evaluations (e.g., evaluations of truth and correctness) from the earliest transcripts. We observed that although all four words emerged in many nonmoral contexts, they were used quite differently. “Good” and “bad” were typically used to describe something as being desirable, enjoyable, or of value (e.g., good book, bad idea), whereas “right” and “wrong” typically referred to something being true or correct (e.g., right answer, wrong foot). We speculate that children’s early focus on desires and emotions, rather than beliefs (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995), underwrites this apparent tendency to view morality as more closely tied to desirability than to truth or correctness. This may explain why researchers adopting a largely cognitive focus on development have typically regarded children as late bloomers in the moral domain (e.g., Piaget, 1965).

In terms of how moral language was used, both Abe and Sarah were most likely to use moral words to give or request reasons and to communicate feelings, which both children did more frequently than the adults, although the adults engaged in perspective taking and expressed sympathy more frequently than either child. For instance, Abe, 3.1 years, explained why he punished his bunny by saying “because he did something wrong.” Sarah, 4.2 years, explained her good behavior: “I didn’t spill it last night uhuh Mommy? Because I’m a good girl last night.” They communicated about feelings: Sarah, 2.4 years, “poor Donna crying”; Abe, 4.2 years, “yeah friends could be still friends if they’re mad.” And they both expressed (dis)approval about others (Sarah, 4.11 years, “oh Betty’s always bad”; Abe, 2.8 years, “Lisa that’s not nice! That was naughty!”) and their own behavior (Sarah, 3.8 years, “I wa[s]n’t good. I was going to fight”; Abe, 3.2 years, “oops I splashed and that’s not very good”), although Sarah did it more frequently than Abe. Such (dis)approval came largely in the form of gossip or pretend play, although it is easy to see how it could transform into tattling in the presence of siblings (den Bak & Ross, 1996). In addition, they both discussed obedience/punishment—Sarah, 3.2 years,

“he’s a bad bear and that means I put you in the crib”; Abe, 4.2 years, “if I be real good at the community center will you get me a prize?”—although the primary difference between Abe and Sarah and their parents was that the adults spent much more time (40–50%) discussing obedience issues.

In examining changes in the function of children’s moral talk over time, we found that for both Abe and Sarah giving/requesting reasons in moral conversation increased with age. This makes sense given that recognizing and employing reasons is a cognitive skill that develops with age and increased language sophistication (Moshman, 1990; Pillow, 2002). Another increase with age was in Abe’s moral conversation aimed at instruction/modeling, which appeared predominantly in parent-child pretend play episodes. In these, Abe instructed the adult on how to enact a particular scene or model a set of morally relevant behaviors. Interestingly, Abe’s increase in instruction and modeling corresponded to a decrease in the same type of talk by his adult conversation partners; the pretend play episodes seemed increasingly under Abe’s control.

Both Abe and his parents and Sarah and her parents demonstrated a decrease over time, relative to other moral talk, in the tendency to communicate feelings, express sympathy, or engage in perspective taking relative to other moral uses, perhaps simply indicating that other sorts of moral talk became more dominant over time. It is noteworthy that these constructs showed up in both child and adult uses in the earliest transcripts. Both findings potentially qualify the extant literature on the relatively late emergence and increase in prevalence of perspective taking over the early and middle school years (Selman, 1980), especially with respect to discussion of moral issues (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005).

Both children and parents talked most frequently (in 60–80% of moral conversations) about the disposition/behavior of others, often discussing the niceness or meanness of others’ dispositions or the goodness or badness of others’ behavior. They talked about the dispositions and behaviors of friends, other children at school and in the neighborhood, characters in books and on TV, their toys, and their pets. Both children also referred frequently (in roughly 30% of moral conversations) to their own dispositions/behaviors, whereas adults did not. That is, children’s, not adults’, behaviors were most often the topic of discussion. For Abe and his parents, the feelings and welfare of others was the topic of about 25% of moral conversations. Sarah and her parents also discussed them although not as frequently as obedience and punishment, which occupied almost 50% of their discussions. Again, these findings confirm Snow’s (1987) preliminary analysis—in which Ross frequently referred to “human spiritual states”—while extending such exploration both in breadth and depth.

Overall, there was little talk about social rules, laws, principles (i.e., general moral duties or truths), or damage to goods or property by either child or parents. In short, there was little reference to abstract or otherwise impersonal factors. Instead, discussions focused on interpersonal dynamics and how one's attitudes and behaviors positively or negatively affected other people (and *visa versa*). This finding suggests that young children's documented increase in awareness of and ability to comply with standards around the third year (Flavell, 1977; Lamb, 1991; Largo & Howard, 1979; Kagan, 1971) might reflect the salience of parental (dis)approval more than explicit recognition of impersonal standards or rules.

Interestingly, Dunn's (1987) examination of conversations between young children and their mothers and siblings revealed that in the first two years of life there was a significant increase in the frequency with which both mothers and siblings, speaking to young children, referred to social rules and broken or flawed objects. Although we also found reference to broken or flawed objects in moral contexts (e.g., Abe, 3.4 years, "Glue it on that would be a really good idea poor bunny he really hops right on his head and he just got broken he really hops"; Sarah, 4.10 years, "When I get to have a broken toy I'm gonna give that to him. I'm gonna give him a broken arm"), such references were not frequent (Abe, 8.1% of the total moral uses; Abe's adults, 3.9%; Sarah, 2.8%; Sarah's adults, 5.4%), nor were developmental trends apparent. One explanation might be that Abe and Sarah are each the only child in their families, and perhaps reference to both rules and damaged property is more common in multichild homes due to the conflict that arises between siblings. While such differences may be a function of the context in which these conversations occurred, it raises the interesting question of whether a child's moral sensibility is uniform across contexts. Abe's and Sarah's moral landscapes, for example, may each look very different at home than at school.

Both children used moral words actively, that is, either creatively, in the form of pretend-play or storytelling, or to reason about (in the sense of giving reasons for why or how morally significant events transpired) moral issues. In fact, moral words were used actively much more than passively, suggesting that these children were not simply passive recipients or imitators of moral instruction and evaluation. We noted that imaginative creativity was often apparent in Abe's and Sarah's moral use of target words, corresponding to both Snow's (1987) finding that Ross engaged in moral fantasy in situations of storytelling and pretend-play and to Dunn's (1987) report that pretend play figured importantly in children's moral understanding, especially in the joint play between children and their siblings, with the younger children making significant "innovative contributions" to the play

(p. 104). In addition, both Abe and Sarah actively reasoned and inferred, explaining that certain things are good or bad for certain reasons, that certain dispositions are connected to certain types of behaviors (e.g., mean people do mean things), and so forth. For instance, Abe, 2.1 years, said, "I think they are mean to that man because they put him in that glue," and Sarah, 4.9 years, said, "Donna was crying yesterday because I let her use my pocketbook a little and she said I can't you can't use it." As noted above, neither child's active contributions increased with age.

Both Abe and Sarah appeared to be more sensitive to internal than external motivations with respect to addressing moral issues, Abe more so than Sarah (perhaps not surprising, considering that Abe's parents were more likely to refer to internal motivation, whereas Sarah's referred more to external motivation). Both Abe and Sarah demonstrated sensitivity to the link between internal motivations and both judgments and actions. For instance, Abe, 3.4 years, said, "I'm picking up mine because I want you to be happy"; Sarah, 3.5 years, explaining why someone should not be picked up by his hair, said, "that would hurt." Both children and adults also remarked on external motivations, although not as often (except Sarah's mother, who did it more often). Sarah, 2.6 years, when asked what happens to her when she is a "naughty girl," answered "I bad get bump" (bump = spanking). Abe, 4.11 years, said, "My Mom would say 'Abe Duncan'! You should be ashamed of yourself and I'm gon (t)a get you for real Abe Duncan." Except for Sarah's mother, it seemed that most often the resolution of moral issues was guided by concerns for persons' feelings and welfare rather than by external constraints (e.g., disapproval, laws/rules, standards, etc.).

Both children and adults engaged in more context-specific than context-general discussions about moral issues, focusing on the immediate relevance of specific attitudes and behaviors rather than drawing general conclusions. For instance, Abe, 3.3 years, apologized to his mother, "I'm sorry I said that," after calling her a "stinker"; Sarah, 4.2 years, recalled, "I didn't spill it last night uhuh Mommy? because I'm a good girl last night." Surprisingly, both children were more likely to make context-general remarks than the adults, opposite to what one might expect given the common conception of the adults as educators, trying to inculcate general moral guidelines and truths. One interpretation is that Abe and Sarah employed essentialist talk with respect to moral issues more frequently than the adults, perhaps reflecting broader essentialist thinking (Davidson & Gelman, 1990; Gelman & Coley, 1990). In other words, Abe and Sarah made more generic statements (e.g., Abe, 3.6 years, "bombs hurt people"; Sarah, 4.6 years: "don't hit a girl with glasses") than did adults, in line with evidence showing that children need not rely on adult instruction or guidance

to construct generalizations (Gelman, 2003), allowing the speaker to extend her or his moral assessment to an entire category as opposed to simply one instance of it.

Conclusion

Our results portray two young children who are both active in discussion of moral issues with adults and sensitive to numerous considerations that appear to be crucial to the development of moral understanding. Both Abe and Sarah demonstrated sensitivity not only to the fact that certain behaviors and situations warranted (dis)approval and reward/punishment but also to the fact that such behaviors and situations were either good or bad—and therefore warranted (dis)approval and reward/punishment—because they involved benefit or harm to another's feelings, needs or welfare, and overall well-being. In short, both Abe and Sarah demonstrated early sensitivity to the moral significance of their own dispositions or behaviors and to the dispositions or behaviors of others. They communicated about the goodness and badness of people, actions, things, ideas, and situations. They demonstrated at least a basic understanding of the normativity that grounds moral issues, giving reasons for why certain things should or should not happen and why some things ought to be done or not done. And they employed their understanding of these moral issues in their pretend play, creating scenarios with nice or mean characters that engaged in good or bad acts.

Against the background of such striking similarities, two individually unique moral sensibilities can be seen. Abe's moral landscape was complex and imaginative. Although he engaged in slightly fewer moral conversations than Sarah overall, Abe's conversations tended to be rich with discussions of feelings and reasons. He displayed sensitivity to the needs and well-being of others. Sarah's moral landscape looked much more Kohlbergian in the sense that it was dominated by egocentric focus on denying or confirming (as well as enforcing) obedience and expressing her own (dis)approval of things that other people have done or said.

Of course, it remains an open question how well Abe's and Sarah's language reflects their understanding. Children may sound smarter than they really are (insofar as they employ words they do not yet understand), or, alternatively, early language limitations could mask early understanding. Insofar as we interpret our findings as reflecting early capacities and sensitivity, we are less troubled by the latter possibility than the former. To be sure, we do not claim that Abe and Sarah have a sophisticated grasp of moral concepts or that they are enormously articulate about them but rather that they are active participants in moral conversations who make sensible reference to a variety of

important moral dimensions. Such findings, in conjunction with other reports of early competencies, indicate that future research should be guided by theories that acknowledge early moral capacities, whether in the form of specifically structured cognitive or emotive domains (or modules) or an early sensibility. This is not to suggest that socialization and moral instruction are unimportant but rather that they encourage, guide, and reinforce already existing sensibilities. In documenting early interchanges with distinctive individual qualities and emphases, our findings also underwrite the potential importance of conversation as a primary medium for socialization (and therefore an important contributor to moral development).

Researchers must continue to explore the origins and development of morality in young children. Our findings indicate the need to examine verbal (and nonverbal) interchanges even before children have reached their 2nd birthdays, especially to shed light on the relative frequency of such conversations for 2-year-old children compared to older children. In addition, as the case study style of analysis suggests, methodologies should be designed to be sensitive to contextual variables in order to further explore the contextual sensitivity of individual children's developing moral sensibilities.

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Portraits of Early Moral Sensibility

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APPENDIX

	Abe		Sarah	
	# Target	# Moral	# Target	# Moral
	Moral Evaluation			
good	803	36	701	105
bad	72	10	143	96
right	1164	0	1140	2
wrong	86	3	78	5
nice	223	52	302	59
mean	322	53	191	3
kind	285	1	247	0
poor	5	3	111	95
friend	106	34	82	13
naughty	22	10	23	17
wise	0	0	9	1
enemy	8	5	0	0
brat	0	0	4	2
wicked	7	2	7	0
fair	33	3	4	1
terrible	0	0	21	3
awful	3	0	117	1
disgusting	0	0	1	0
nasty	0	0	4	1
rough	4	2	7	1
	Moral Emotions/Internal States			
angry	27	14	3	1
sorry	46	16	45	9
worry	10	0	11	0
sad	47	8	5	1
hope	79	4	30	1
happy	123	11	70	0
afraid	31	2	34	6
love	88	15	160	46
hate	20	1	38	22
ashamed	1	1	0	0
trust	1	0	0	0
mercy	1	0	0	0
forgive	0	0	1	0

(continued)

APPENDIX *continued*

	Abe		Sarah	
	# Target	# Moral	# Target	# Moral
unhappy	1	1	0	0
sympathy	0	0	1	0
Moral Actions				
need	637	6	129	2
help	400	33	128	14
hurt	177	30	162	24
hit	160	17	142	86
cry	96	19	105	23
kiss	68	8	29	6
give	141	9	433	46
punish	3	1	4	3
kill	84	9	17	2
fight	35	5	48	6
care	13	1	35	4
share	23	6	8	1
shame	0	0	2	0
kick	35	3	45	1
beat	29	1	24	3
steal	7	5	6	2
lie	23	3	11	0
hug	21	2	11	2
protect	22	4	0	0
promise	0	0	7	2
break	105	3	157	11
tease	32	0	17	2
ignore	1	0	0	0
cheat	0	0	15	6
spank	3	2	80	31
Moral Traits				
brave	8	2	2	1
strong	25	0	22	1
gentle	3	0	1	0
honest	1	1	4	0
generous	0	0	1	0

Portraits of Early Moral Sensibility

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APPENDIX *continued*

	Abe		Sarah	
	# Target	# Moral	# Target	# Moral
Moral Obligation				
must	72	0	112	3
should	247	19	134	6
better	193	13	273	38
suppose	49	2	151	12
trouble	8	0	26	8
ought	5	0	11	0
rule	3	1	4	2
justice	0	0	1	0
duty	0	0	1	0
Other				
war	7	1	9	1
peace	3	0	3	0
gift	25	0	1	0
Discarded Words: Part of Original List				
cruel	ideal	devotion	pleased	humble
sin/ful	guilt/y	charity	reward	responsible
bully	compassion	embarrassed	discipline	noble
evil	self-control	fear	loyal	honor
				dignity