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## THE YOUTH RESEARCH FORUM

### **The Development of the Moral Compass** A study among children aged 7 to 16 in the UK

#### **Report Summary**

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**for:**

The Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development.

April 20th 2011, London.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Youth Research Forum, sponsored by the Family Research Division of the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development (DIIFSD), has conducted a study of moral development among children in the UK. This document presents the findings of the study, which it is hoped to roll out globally in due course.

***The Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development*** (DIIFSD) is an interdisciplinary research, policy and community outreach organization established in 2005 by Her Highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser. DIIFSD works to achieve and implement the commitments set out in The Doha Declaration as well as the objectives of the International Year of the Family. DIIFSD is a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development.

The Doha Declaration, in reaffirming Article 16(3) of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, affirms “that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to the widest possible protection and assistance by society and the State.”

### **Vision**

To improve and strengthen the family- the natural and fundamental group unit of society- so it can provide a stable foundation for personal well-being, social development and a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations.

### **Mission**

To strengthen the family through a new family diplomacy developed with the assistance of an international network of scholars, policymakers, organizations and citizens who promote family-supportive scholarship, policies and programmes consistent with The Doha Declaration.

### **Resources**

DIIFSD is facilitating research by centralizing and distributing various kinds of resources related to family issues and policies. These services are available

**[www.fsd.org.qa](http://www.fsd.org.qa)**

***The Youth Research Forum*** is a not-for-profit social enterprise which addresses social issues affecting children and young people. An Advisory Board reviews topics which Members consider worthy of consideration for study and these topics are then referred to the Forum’s Council for decisions. Projects undertaken by the Forum usually involve international literature reviews in the first instance followed by dedicated research programmes. The majority of projects undertaken by the Forum have implications for policy development in the UK and internationally and can be described as “evidence-led initiatives” which are also subject to peer review. Project outcomes may become the topic of conferences or seminars which are managed by the leading supplier of public conferences in the UK, Neil Stewart Associates and may also be included with permission into NSA’s Policy Review online and Policy Review Magazine. NSA is a Founder Member of the Youth Research Forum.

**[www.youthresearchforum.com](http://www.youthresearchforum.com)**

The study consists of three main stages:

- An international literature review.
- A qualitative exploration, involving a pilot study among 6-7 year olds to determine the feasibility of proposed research methods among very young children, followed by a series of 12 Matched Pair (depth) interviews among 7-16 year olds.
- An online, nationally representative quantitative survey of 750 7-16 year olds, using a structured questionnaire developed from the findings of the prior stages, fielded on behalf of the YRF by Research Now!

The present report summarizes the findings of the quantitative survey. The full data comprising approximately 350 data pages (format dependent) will be made available to researchers wishing to explore it in greater detail.

***The Youth Research Forum offers its profound gratitude to the Family Research Division of the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development (DIIFSD) for making this study possible.***

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Glen G. Smith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Glen G. Smith, CEO, YRF**

## 2. SUMMARY

### 2.1. Background

*'The most important human endeavour is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.'*

*Albert Einstein*

The Moral Compass of children and young people is subject to change with the passage of time. However, there has been little significant research into this topic conducted for many years in the UK. This project represents a starting point to ultimately deliver an international picture of the moral compass of young people for the benefit of families, educators, leaders of civil society and policy makers throughout the region and the globe.

Helping children develop personal values such as honesty, self reliance and dependability is a very important part of their education and it fosters good citizenship. The values children are taught are their best protection from the influences of peer pressure and some of the temptations of consumer and criminal cultures. In liberal societies, children with their own values clearly defined can make their own decisions rather than imitate their friends or the examples set by older peers or negative role models.

(In more authoritarian societies, a well developed moral compass will steer children towards the guides and role-models chosen by their parents or the society's leaders. But in the UK, the subject of the present study, the liberal model is assumed to be the relevant one.)

Issues of moral standards evolve together with society. What was considered right a few generations ago would be understood and judged today with different moral norms. An example of this phenomenon is found in the changes of what people consider as individual rights over generations. (*Bloom, 2010*).

The research will provide clarification of the ages when children are aware of right and wrong and have developed an understanding of the social, and potentially criminal, implications of their actions.

#### ***The issue of the 'age of criminal responsibility'***

The constant rise in juvenile anti-social and criminal behaviour attests that adequate answers are still missing. It is crucial that policy makers gain a deep understanding of the key factors that drive children's moral development to implement efficient solutions.

The considerable variability across countries of the legal age of criminal responsibility is indicative of the lack of knowledge in this area. It is assumed by the legal systems that for a child to be considered criminally responsible, he or she must understand the difference between right and wrong.

Currently the Age of Criminal Responsibility (ACR) in England & Wales is 10 years of age, which is significantly below the average ACR set by most European countries (between 14 and 16, besides a couple of exceptions such as Switzerland and Cyprus). While generating resistance, several authorities such as the UN committee for the Rights of the Child, are adding pressure for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised from 10 to 12 in the UK, aligning more with other European countries. The strength of the

argument comes from accumulating evidence that if children enter the criminal justice system too young, they are easily criminalized and show recurrence of problem behaviour before being morally redirected. There are also strong financial implications in sentencing a child, while other strong options such as family intervention programmes could save governments millions of pounds. (*Hazel, 2008, Barnardos report 2010, Daily Mail 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010*).

## 2.2. Study objectives and methods

The study addressed the following questions:

- How does the Moral Compass develop from age seven to 16?
- What do children understand by morality?
- Who do children turn to for moral guidance?
- What part do religion, gender and class play in moral development?
- What are the implications for education and social policy?

The work involved four stages:

1. Literature review
2. Qualitative research, i.e. focus groups and interviews
3. Development of survey instruments
4. Online survey of 750 children aged 7-16, sample drawn from the *Research Now* UK household panel. Data collection took place from December 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> 2010.

## 2.3. Main findings

### 2.3.1. How does the moral compass develop from age seven to 16?

- By the age of seven years, children are able to distinguish between right and wrong and seem to be aware of the criminal implications of their behaviour.
- As they get older they become more thoughtful and nuanced in their attitudes to moral questions:
  - Much less asking for guidance, i.e. reliance on authority, although they do still want to have someone to turn to.
  - More thinking about the consequences, both personal (eg punishment) and moral.
  - BUT the numbers “always doing what they think is right, whatever happens” changes little, remaining between one-quarter and one-third.
- However, Moral **behaviour** declines with age up to 16. They know right from wrong, but behaviour slips back.
- Relatively little slipping back is seen with playing fair in sport. This may be, at least in part, because sport is public behaviour where the risk of being found out is high compared with unobserved behaviour. Or it may be that moral behaviour in sport remains important to children as they grow older, while in other aspects of life it loses its high priority.

### 2.3.2. What do children understand by morality?

- The most important aspects of morality, as perceived by the children, are:
  - Loyalty to friends
  - Caring for people in need
  - Being fair to everyone
- Less important to them are:
  - Showing respect
  - Tolerance of other people's choices
  - Belonging to a group with the same moral ideas as you.
- There is little development in moral priorities with age, the rank order of importance remaining almost exactly the same at 15-16 as at 7-9.

### 2.3.3. Who do children turn to for moral guidance?

- Most of them name their mothers as the main source of moral guidance if they need advice.
- Fathers follow in second place, then a grandparent.
- Best friends and siblings are turned to by very few children.
- Teachers are named as a source of guidance by 44% of 7-9 year olds, but by only 20% of 15-16 year-olds. This raises important questions about the role of teachers as moral guides.
- Religious leaders are mentioned by around 5%.
- The role of parents decreases as the children get older, leaving a vacuum which other potential guides/mentors do not adequately fill.

### 2.3.4. What part do religion, gender and class play in moral development?

- Religious upbringing in the UK appears to have virtually no bearing on the development of moral awareness and beliefs in the 7-16 age-range, which is not surprising given that these appear to be largely developed by the age of 7 years.
- However, children with a claimed religious upbringing are rather more inclined to worry about letting themselves down, and less about getting punished, than those without a religious upbringing.
- There is no clear relationship between religious upbringing and the development of moral **behaviour**, as self-reported in this survey.
- There are some gender and social class differences, though generally not great. For example, girls attach more importance than boys to fairness, including in sport.

## 2.4. Implications for policy

- A key finding of this research – that children are aware of right and wrong behaviours at the age of seven years, does challenge the validity and huge variability in the Age of Criminal Responsibility (ACR) set in different countries, ranging from 5 to 18 years worldwide.

Should decisions relating to the ACR be based on young people's understanding and beliefs and thinking, as well as self-reported behaviour-choices? If so, are children sufficiently advanced by ages 7, 10, 12?

- The UK is confirmed as a predominately secular country, where religious upbringing has little impact on moral development. (Note that religious upbringing, at around 40% of children, is not the same as religious affiliation, at perhaps 5-10% depending on the data source.)
  - What implications does this have for education policy?
  - What might religious leaders be doing about it? Are the Churches sufficiently focused on good works, i.e. moral behaviour, rather than faith, as the path to salvation?
- This study has indicated the desirability of increasing the role of teachers as moral mentors to children and youth, to fill the gap left by parents as children grow older. But how is this to be done?
  - Via the curriculum?
  - Through school and classroom organisation and processes?
  - Via faith schools? The evidence suggests not, but current policy is probably not evidence-based as much as faith-based.
  - By giving greater authority to teachers, eg. to discipline children?
  - By educating parents to show respect for teachers and to instil respect in their children?
- The study leaves open the question, how responsibility for the moral development of children should be shared:
  - Parents - mothers and fathers?
  - Social services?
  - Police / other enforcement agencies?
  - Teachers?
  - Religious organizations?
  - Community / voluntary organizations?
  - The media?