

## Prosocial Development: Defining the Basis for Prosocial Education

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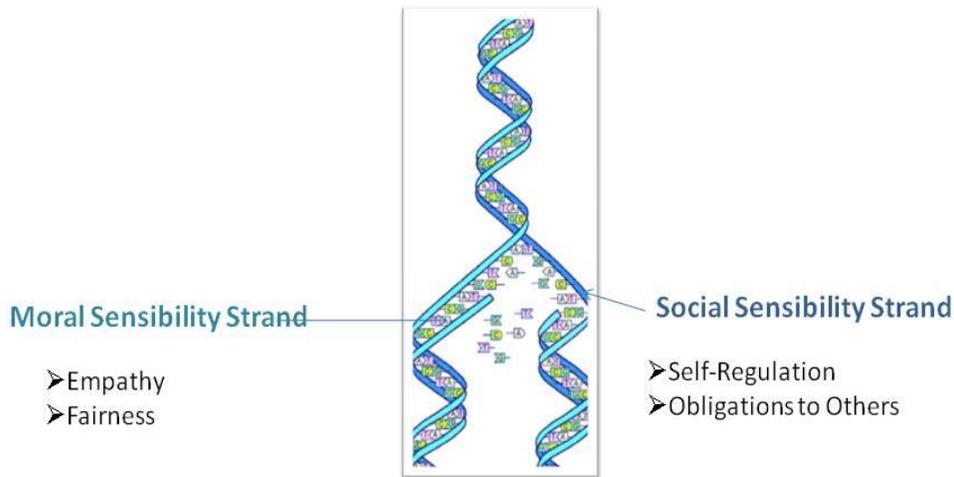
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As my colleague, Ann Higgins D'Alessandro, at Fordham University likes to put it, education, like a coin, has two sides. In the same way that a coin must have a head and a tail, so too must education realize two goals, 1) that children learn and become critically knowledgeable, and 2) that they develop into mature, productive, and ethical citizens—this second goal is the goal of what we call prosocial education. While the influences that assist children to develop prosocially include families, peers, youth organizations and religious institutions, for Americans schools are the primary public institution where *prosocialization* takes place. We expect our children to be able to share with acquaintances and strangers, to make friends, to work cooperatively, and to develop a sense of self as a moral person. Ultimately we hope they will grow into productive people and engaged citizen of a democratic republic. The ways in which children make friends, learn to work with others-both adults and peers, and begin to know about themselves both naturally develop and must be taught. Both the development and the teaching of these prosocial attitudes and skills takes place in schools; schools are the practice ground-- for prosocial development and education.

What do we know about the conditions for prosocial development? We need to recognize that we are talking about a configuration of both social and moral development that are inextricably tied together -- the double helix of prosocial development. Morality is a natural part of the human system, and research has now given us four building blocks, two which define each strand of our prosocial double helix: empathy and fairness which guide our moral sensibilities, and self-regulation and obligation to others, which guide our social sensibilities. Let's briefly

examine these building blocks

## Prosocial Development



Empathy provides the foundation for caring and compassion and is evident even in newborns who show signs of distress and happiness in response to the emotions of others around them. Fairness as a concern is evident in interactions between toddlers -- anyone who has seen what happens when a couple of two-year olds see unevenly divided pieces of chocolate cake sees fairness awareness in action. The words, "That's not fair!" feel like they're programmed into our DNA.

For there to be any measure of social cohesion, a significant degree of self-control is a prerequisite. And without a sense of obligation to one another, how would rules mean anything? A code of conduct for students and professional ethical principles define what we expect of each other and allow us to take stock of ourselves and a measure ourselves against both social and personal standards. The good news is that children naturally want to follow our directions and meet our expectations if they are well-meaning and make sense, indeed, sometimes even when they don't make sense. The discipline we know that is essential to learning is self-regulation in service of a purpose. So, the educators fundamental job is this melding of school work with purpose . As William Damon puts it -- "The child's natural moral sense requires nurturing if it is to develop into a mature and reliable commitment to act in a caring and ethical manner." For the good of our civilization this goal is very worth pursuing, because if the moral and social development of our children are not as worthy of attention as our drive for academic success in

the service of economic productivity, we will foster the kind of cultural impoverishment and ethical misconduct that undermines our ability to thrive as a nation.