

# Moral Education in the Family: Theoretical Foundations and Innovative Paths

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**Abstract:** Family moral education serves as the cornerstone of individual socialization and the foundation of social moral construction. This paper examines the theoretical foundations, contemporary challenges, and innovative paths of moral education within the family context. The research identifies that the moral function of the family manifests primarily through daily life practices, with ethical education and life education constituting its core components. Drawing on Emile Durkheim's theoretical framework, which conceptualizes the family as "having moral function but not serving as a specialized moral institution," this study emphasizes the necessity of collaborative efforts between families and schools. The life-oriented approach to moral education, which integrates ethical learning into daily family interactions, is crucial for fostering children's altruistic tendencies and internalization of collective consciousness.

**Keywords:** Family moral education; Moral function; Life form; Home-school cooperation; Moral mentality

## 1. Introduction

Family moral education represents the initial and most enduring form of moral learning in an individual's life, forming the bedrock of character development and value formation. In the context of rapid social transformation and technological advancement, the traditional moral education function of the family faces unprecedented challenges. The intensification of educational competition, the proliferation of digital products, and changes in family structure have collectively contributed to the gradual erosion of the family's moral education role, leading to various developmental dilemmas among younger generations. The contemporary significance of family moral education continues to be widely recognized by researchers and practitioners alike. As noted in research on S University, modern families, typically comprising only couples, have experienced a reduction in their moral education capacity due to scaled-down family structures. Similarly, studies on young adults born between 1980 and 2000 indicate that asymmetrical parent-child relationships within families often lead to moral mentality issues, manifesting as "moral deficit" and "moral coercion". These challenges highlight the urgent need to reconceptualize and strengthen moral education within family contexts.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Core Functions of Family Moral Education

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Moral Function

French sociologist Emile Durkheim's conceptualization of the family as "having moral function but not serving as a specialized moral institution" offers a foundational perspective for understanding family moral education. This view acknowledges the inherent moral dimensions of family life while recognizing the limitations of families as exclusive sites for moral development. Durkheim argued that family life serves as a powerful vehicle for internalizing collective consciousness among members. Within family collective life, parents naturally love their children, who benefit from a form of instinctual parental affection, creating the strongest social bonds.

### 2.2 The Life Form as Core Component

Modern family moral education manifests in three coexisting forms: life-oriented, school-imitating, and autonomous. Among these, the life form represents the most essential dimension of family moral education. This form embeds moral learning within daily family life, characterized by natural, subtle educational processes that intertwine conscious guidance with unconscious influence. Life-formed moral education takes everyday ethical norms and life skills as its primary content. From infancy, children establish ethical relationships with other family members, and how these relationships are handled directly impacts children's quality of life within both family and broader social communities.

Table 1: Three Forms of Modern Family Moral Education

| Form Type             | Core Characteristics                                | Primary Content   | Implementation Method  |
|-----------------------|---|---|--|
| Life Form             | Natural, subtle, daily life integration             | Ethical norms, life skills, interpersonal interaction         | Daily interactions, parental modeling, situational guidance      |
| School-Imitating Form | Structured, knowledge-focused, performance-oriented | Academic knowledge, specialized skills, test preparation      | Tutoring, scheduled practice, homework supervision               |
| Autonomous Form       | Child-centered, interest-driven, personalized       | Talent development, hobby cultivation, family-specific values | Customized activities, resource provision, experiential learning |

This form of moral education typically manifests directly within daily household activities. On one hand, it occurs through everyday interactions between parents, other relatives, and children, with methods that are direct and situational. Parents' daily education of their children simultaneously involves managing or maintaining certain aspects of daily life while providing disciplinary guidance for their children's behavioral patterns. The specific methods and content are often immediate responses or guidance from parents based on current circumstances.

### 2.3 Functional Differentiation from School Moral Education

While both families and schools contribute to moral development, their roles and functions exhibit fundamental differences. Family moral education primarily builds upon emotional bonds and daily life practices, whereas school moral education emphasizes systematic knowledge and collective discipline. The family's unique advantage lies in its ability to provide moral education through emotional connections and real-life scenarios that are difficult to replicate in institutional settings<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 3. Innovative Paths for Family Moral Education

### 3.1 Philosophical Reorientation and Concept Return

The innovation of family moral education must begin with a fundamental reorientation of perspectives and a return to core concepts. The transition from "track thinking" to "field thinking" represents a particularly promising framework for this reorientation. While track thinking emphasizes standardized competition and uniform development paths, field thinking prioritizes diverse growth possibilities and unique life experiences. This shift acknowledges that each child possesses distinctive characteristics and potential that cannot be adequately nurtured through standardized approaches alone. This philosophical reorientation also involves reestablishing the view that "life education is the 'root' of family education, while character education is its 'soul'". By recognizing the foundational importance of life education and character development, families can rebalance their educational priorities, focusing less on academic achievement and more on ethical formation. Parents should remember that "loving children scientifically is a skill," and parental exemplars remain the "foundation" of family education. This conceptual return helps families resist the utilitarian tendencies that have increasingly dominated educational practices, creating space for more authentic moral development.

### 3.2 Life World Reconstruction and Ecological Restoration

The restoration of family moral education requires the deliberate reconstruction of life worlds and the repair of educational ecologies. This involves safeguarding children's "leisure time and space," which serves as a crucial foundation for rebuilding adolescents' internal order and stimulating autonomy. In contemporary society, where children's time and space are increasingly squeezed by performance-based evaluations, protecting unstructured time becomes an essential precondition for effective moral education. Creating supportive environments represents another crucial strategy for ecological restoration, based on the understanding that "good environments are most healing". Such environments might include establishing phone-free schools and advocating for legislative restrictions on minors' nighttime internet use. Beyond these technical measures, families can cultivate enriching environments by increasing shared activities, establishing family traditions and rituals, and creating opportunities for intergenerational interaction. These practices provide natural contexts for moral learning through observation, imitation, and participation<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 3.3 Home-School Collaboration and Functional Complementarity

Recognizing the distinct yet complementary roles of families and schools enables more effective moral education through strategic collaboration. While families excel in providing emotional security, modeling ethical behavior in daily life, and fostering individual character, schools offer systematic knowledge instruction, collective discipline training, and diverse social experiences. This functional differentiation suggests that optimal moral development occurs when families and schools collaborate rather than when one attempts to replace the other. Durkheim's perspective on this collaboration emphasizes that "family life is the core of morality, a university of loyalty, selflessness, and moral communication". However, he also acknowledged the limitations of modern families in moral education due to their reduced size and changed structure. Schools can compensate for these limitations by providing consistent normative systems and collective life experiences that modern families may struggle to offer. Through this complementary approach, families and schools can jointly address the challenges posed by social transformation and technological development.

### 3.4 Digital Empowerment and Traditional Integration

The innovation of family moral education must thoughtfully address technological challenges while strategically leveraging digital tools. In the AI era, parents should maintain an open exploratory spirit, fostering children's humanistic literacy and independent think-

ing abilities, which are more important than ever. Rather than completely rejecting digital technologies, families can develop mindful approaches to technology use that preserve essential human connections while utilizing digital resources to enhance moral education. Simultaneously, families benefit from integrating traditional moral wisdom into contemporary practices. Traditional family instructions embody rich ecological ethical teachings and experiences, constituting an important intellectual resource for cultivating new ecological values<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

Family moral education represents a complex yet crucial undertaking that requires continuous adaptation to changing circumstances while maintaining its core principles. This study has highlighted the theoretical foundations, contemporary challenges, and innovative paths for moral education within family contexts. The findings underscore the importance of life-oriented approaches, the complementary roles of families and schools, and the need for strategic responses to social and technological changes. The transformation from “track thinking” to “field thinking” offers a promising philosophical foundation for reorienting family moral education. This shift acknowledges the unique qualities of each child and the diverse paths toward moral maturity. By prioritizing life education as the “root” and character education as the “soul” of family education, families can rebalance their priorities and create more meaningful moral learning experiences. This reorientation also helps address the moral mentality issues observed among contemporary youth, including “moral deficit” and “moral coercion”.

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