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Can ethics really be taught? The largest review of its kind says yes, it can

Dedicated ethics education improves students' moral reasoning and helps them want to do the right thing and it works from primary school right through to university, according to new research from Australian Catholic University.

The systematic review and meta-analysis, led by Dr Geetanjali Basarkod from ACU's Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, is the largest review of the effectiveness of ethics education.

Using evidence from 92 randomised controlled trials across 20 countries, spanning four decades, and involving nearly 13,000 students, [the review found that](#) ethics education works.

Dr Basarkod called on education departments around the country to embed ethics in schools as a core subject.

Alternatively, states could consider a volunteer-led model, such as the one in NSW, which is the only jurisdiction that offers a standalone ethics program. That program, *Primary Ethics*, is offered to students who opt out of Religious Instruction.

"As parents, we all want our children to grow up to be good people who consider how their actions affect others," Dr Basarkod said.

"Raising good citizens is clearly part of our job as parents, but the evidence says ethics education belongs in the classroom, not just around the dinner table.

"Our findings show that dedicated ethics education in schools and universities can genuinely help by improving students' ability to recognise ethical issues, reason through them, and prioritise doing the right thing."

The research findings show that students who received educational ethics interventions had better moral outcomes compared to students who did not.

The way ethics is taught was also important. Classes that involved student discussions were effective at improving moral outcomes, while those relying solely on lectures or readings did not show clear evidence of effectiveness.

"Evidence from past research suggests that discussions can encourage students to engage more deeply and actively with their learning, while also enabling collaboration and understanding others' perspectives," Dr Basarkod said.

Dr Basarkod said that this research identifies to a way of teaching that can help young people navigate an increasingly polarised society.

“Addressing society's greatest challenges, such as climate change, requires us to act as moral agents. Ethical interventions within schools and universities have the potential to cultivate ethical and moral attributes in millions of people,” she said.

Dr Geetanjali Basarkod is available for interview.

Read more about the study in [The Conversation](#).

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