



Applied Moral Systems Theory

A Systems Approach to Advocacy

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

1. Introduction
2. Defining Applied Moral Systems Theory
3. System Psychology: Understanding the “Mind” of Institutions
4. The System as an Organism: Parallels to Human Physiology
5. Systemic Defensiveness: Institutional “Fight or Flight”
6. Strategies for Influencing Systems (Without Triggering Defense)
7. Conceptual and Philosophical Underpinnings
8. Applied Moral Systems Theory in Action: An Illustrative Example
9. Conclusion
10. Further Reading
11. *Applied Moral Systems Theory — Field Manual Addendum*
 - Orientation: The Advocate as System Reader
 - The Five Principles in Practice
 - The Grounding Check
 - System Mapping Worksheet
 - Narrative Calibration
 - Crisis-to-Equilibrium Protocol
 - The Law of Narrative Equilibrium

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

Introduction

Advocacy is often framed as a battle between right and wrong, but the reality is more complex. The Autism Advocacy Network (AAN) approaches advocacy not as a series of individual conflicts but as a holistic engagement with larger systems. In this paper, we present our general theory of advocacy, called **Applied Moral Systems Theory (AMST)**. AMST is an interdisciplinary framework that helps advocates understand how complex systems – like schools, churches, or government agencies – behave and how they can be influenced ethically and effectively. Written in a formal yet accessible voice, this document outlines the core concepts of AMST with a focus on its practice of **System Psychology**, offering practical strategies for driving change without triggering

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

defensiveness. We integrate insights from psychology, physiology, biology, physics, philosophy, and theology to illustrate how systems function and how moral advocacy can create lasting change.

Page | 3

Defining Applied Moral Systems Theory

Applied Moral Systems Theory is AAN's approach to advocacy that treats every institution or community as a **system** with its own behaviors, analogous to a living organism. At its core, AMST asserts that lasting change comes from working **with** a system's natural dynamics while grounding our efforts in moral principles. The purpose of this theory is to guide advocates in promoting justice and inclusion by understanding how systems self-

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

regulate, how they resist change, and how ethical influence can be applied deliberately.

Page | 4

Unlike adversarial approaches that might vilify individuals, AMST encourages us to view problems as systemic – rooted in policies, norms, and structures – and solutions as emerging from strategic adjustments to those systems. This perspective shifts advocacy from confrontational to collaborative. It means recognizing that a school district or a church is not just a collection of people but an organized network with patterns of behavior, feedback loops, and a kind of “collective mind.” The advocate’s role, then, is akin to a doctor or engineer for social systems: diagnosing issues, identifying leverage points, and intervening in ways

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

that align with the system’s healthy functioning and moral imperatives.

Page | 5

System Psychology: Understanding the “Mind” of Institutions

A hallmark of AMST is what we call **System Psychology** – the practice of applying psychological principles to understand and influence whole systems. Just as individual psychology studies a person’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, System Psychology looks at organizations or communities as entities that act and react. This means considering an institution’s culture, habits, and even its **defense mechanisms**. We ask: *How does this system perceive a threat or challenge? What stories does it tell itself? What values does it hold at its core?*

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

By answering these questions, advocates can Page | 6
tailor their strategies. For example, a public school district may have a culture of “**we’ve always done it this way**” – a kind of institutional habit or tradition. Challenging that habit directly can provoke resistance, much like challenging a person’s deeply held belief might. System Psychology urges us first to **observe** and understand the system’s mindset before leaping to solutions. It’s about empathy on a grand scale: seeing the humanity in an institution, not just in the individuals within it.

The System as an Organism: Parallels to Human Physiology

We often find it useful to describe systems using biological and physiological metaphors. An institution can be thought of as a living organism: it has an “immune system,” a “nervous system,” and a drive to maintain **homeostasis** (stability).

Biologically, homeostasis refers to the tendency of organisms to maintain internal equilibrium – and this concept applies to social systems as well.

Indeed, *self-regulating systems from single-celled organisms up through organizations and even entire cultures all resist change to preserve stability.* This natural resistance isn't inherently malicious; just as our bodies keep a steady temperature, organizations have processes that preserve the status quo.

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

In physical terms, this is akin to **inertia** – a system will “keep moving as it was” unless acted upon by a significant force. Crucially, homeostatic balance in a system is **value-neutral**: it will stabilize both good and bad practices indiscriminately. A school district might continue a harmful disciplinary method year after year simply because it’s the established pattern, not because anyone consciously wants to harm students. Understanding this helps advocates approach change not as fighting evil individuals but as re-tuning a system’s settings.

Page | 8

Systemic Defensiveness: Institutional “Fight or Flight”

When confronted with a perceived threat – such as criticism or a push for change – systems

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

often react in ways comparable to a person's **fight or flight** response. Psychologically, individuals under threat may become defensive or avoidant; similarly, an institution under pressure might **fight** (for example, by disputing the data, doubling down on its stance, or punishing whistleblowers) or **flight** (by denying the problem, avoiding discussion, or silencing dissent). This systemic defensiveness is a survival reflex of the organization. It's as if the institution's "nervous system" senses danger and triggers protective behaviors.

Page | 9

In some cases, organizations even exhibit signs of collective trauma. If a school, for instance, faced a public scandal in the past, it might become hyper-vigilant or hypersensitive to any future complaints. Like a person who has been hurt, the

organization may overreact to small triggers, seeing them as major threats. Understanding this pattern, advocates practicing AMST strive to avoid unnecessarily triggering a system's alarm bells. We aim to **keep the system out of panic mode**, because a panicked system is not primed for thoughtful self-reflection or positive change.

Strategies for Influencing Systems (Without Triggering Defense)

Over time, AAN has developed a set of practical strategies to engage systems in change while minimizing defensive reactions. These approaches, grounded in our understanding of System Psychology, emphasize patience, partnership, and persuasion over provocation. Key strategies include:

- **Observe First:** Before proposing any changes, take time to quietly observe and learn how the system operates. Identify its routines, key players, values, and pain points. By understanding the system's "baseline" state, an advocate can approach it with informed empathy. This principle

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

mirrors a clinician's first step of diagnosis before treatment – or a scientist's careful observation before hypothesis. Observing first helps avoid false assumptions and shows respect for the system's complexity.

Page | 12

1. **Frame as Partner:** Position yourself (and your advocacy) as working alongside the system's members, not against them. From the outset, communicate that you share the institution's ultimate goals – for instance, a school and an advocate both want students to succeed. By framing as a partner, you engage the system's cooperative instincts. The message is *“We're on the same team”*, which can lower the institution's guard. In practice, this might mean using supportive

language, acknowledging the hard work of educators or officials, and emphasizing mutual benefits of the proposed changes.

- 2. Critique Systems, Not People:** Direct criticism at policies or outcomes rather than blaming individuals. Even when malpractice or negligence has occurred, pointing fingers at specific people often triggers personal defensiveness and shifts the focus to blame rather than solutions. AMST advocates focus on changing *systems*: “The discipline policy isn’t working for these reasons...” rather than “The principal is doing a bad job.” This approach aligns with the idea that problems are systemic. By depersonalizing the critique, we invite stakeholders to join in

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

fixing the issue without feeling personally attacked.

- 3. Use Narrative:** Stories can penetrate defenses in ways data often cannot. Human brains are wired to respond to narrative and emotion. Instead of only presenting statistics or legal requirements, we share real-life stories of those affected by the system's shortcomings. For example, telling the story of an autistic student's daily struggles in an overly loud classroom can vividly illustrate the need for sensory accommodations. Narratives create empathy, turning abstract issues into relatable human experiences. This leverages the psychological insight that moral judgments are often driven by gut-level responses and empathy. A compelling

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

story can disarm the instinct to dismiss a problem, opening hearts and minds to change.

Page | 15

- **Reframe with a Moral**

Imperative: Sometimes a system needs to see that change is not just preferable but necessary for ethical reasons. Reframing an issue as a moral imperative means connecting the desired change to the core values or mission that the system claims to uphold. In a religious organization, this might involve invoking scriptural calls to justice and compassion; in a school, it could mean highlighting the duty to provide *Free Appropriate Public Education* to every child. By tapping into values – whether

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

secular ethics or faith-based principles – we appeal to the conscience of the system.

Page | 16

Importantly, this is done **positively**: the goal is to inspire, not shame. The message is, “Living up to our highest ideals requires this change,” which can motivate stakeholders to act out of conviction rather than compliance.

Conceptual and Philosophical Underpinnings

Applied Moral Systems Theory stands on a rich foundation of ideas drawn from multiple disciplines. These intellectual underpinnings inform why our strategies work and why they matter. Here we outline a few key influences:

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

- **Ethics and Moral**

Philosophy: AMST is fundamentally motivated by ethical principles – the belief that systems should be just, equitable, and compassionate. We draw on normative ethics (questions of what is right) to guide advocacy goals, and on practical ethics to navigate real-world dilemmas. For instance, concepts of human dignity and rights inform our moral imperative to act. Philosophically, we align with traditions that emphasize social justice and the common good, recognizing that moral action often needs to be collective to change structural problems.

- **Moral Psychology:**

Understanding how people form moral judgments helps in crafting advocacy

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

messages. Research in moral psychology (for example, the work of Jonathan Haidt) suggests that people often arrive at moral positions based on intuition or emotion, then backfill with reasoning. This insight supports our use of narrative and value-based framing – because facts alone seldom change minds if they clash with someone’s moral intuition. By appealing to shared values (like fairness, care, or authority in a positive sense), we can find common ground. Moreover, moral psychology reminds us that identity is tied to morality; institutions see themselves as “doing good.” We try to work within that self-image rather than directly contradict it.

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

- ✓ **Narrative Identity Theory:** People and groups alike maintain narratives about “who we are.” In an institution, this might be expressed in mission statements or cultural lore (e.g., “This school is like a family” or “We’ve always been a leader in inclusion”). Narrative identity theory (from psychology and philosophy) tells us that these stories are powerful motivators. If our advocacy threatens the story (for example, implying “you are bad people”), the system will likely reject it. Instead, we aim to weave a new narrative that the system can adopt: one where making the advocated change is part of **becoming even more true** to the institution’s best self. In effect, we invite the

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

system to see the change as a continuation of its story, not an attack on its identity.

✓ **Embodied Cognition and Metaphor:**

Page | 20

Embodied cognition is the idea that our thinking is deeply influenced by our physical experiences and metaphors drawn from them. We frequently use bodily metaphors (like “heart of the community” or “social fabric”) because they resonate. In AMST, talking about a system’s “nervous system” or “immune response” isn’t just stylistic – it helps conceptualize abstract organizational dynamics in familiar terms. This makes complex ideas more intuitive and relatable. Likewise, recognizing that stress and fear can be “felt” collectively (like a tense meeting room setting everyone

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

on edge) reminds us that creating a physically and emotionally safe atmosphere can be critical for productive dialogue.

Page | 21

- ✓ **Systems Theory and Physics:** Finally, our framework is indebted to general systems theory, which provides tools for analyzing how parts interconnect and how feedback loops produce stability or change. Concepts like homeostasis, equilibrium, and feedback (borrowed from biology and physics) shape our understanding of advocacy. We see advocacy interventions as inputs to a dynamic system: small changes can sometimes yield big results if introduced at the right leverage points (a principle noted by systems theorists like Donella Meadows). Similarly, from physics we take inspiration

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

in thinking about momentum and friction – recognizing the “friction” that opposes change and the need to build momentum through small wins that accumulate over time.

Page | 22

Applied Moral Systems Theory in Action: An Illustrative Example

To see how these concepts come together, consider a real-world advocacy scenario. Imagine an elementary school where autistic students are frequently punished for behaviors stemming from sensory overload or communication differences. The school isn't evil – but its discipline policy is outdated, and the staff are used to a certain way of doing things. Families have tried to complain, but

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

the school feels attacked and becomes defensive, insisting that their approach is fine.

Page | 23

An AMST-informed advocate from AAN might approach this situation very differently from a conventional advocate. First, they **observe**: attending classes quietly, noting fluorescent lighting, loud bells, and how students react. They gather information about what triggers the problematic behaviors. They also learn about the school's values – for example, the principal frequently mentions “preparing students for the real world” as a core mission. This observation phase allows the advocate to understand the system's perspective and its pressure points without confrontation.

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

Armed with this understanding, the advocate sets up a meeting with school leaders and **frames the conversation as a partnership**. They open by acknowledging the teachers' dedication and the principal's commitment to students. They emphasize that they share the same goal: helping all students succeed. This immediately signals that the advocate is not there to fight the school, but to work with it.

Page | 24

When discussing discipline issues, the advocate **critiques the system, not the people**. They don't say, "The principal is wrong for punishing these kids." Instead, they point out, "The current policy might be unintentionally causing more disruptions, and here's data and a story to illustrate why." They share the story of one autistic

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

student – let’s call him James – who was sent to the office multiple times a week. They describe how James loves learning but the chaotic lunchroom noise sends his anxiety soaring, leading to outbursts. By **using narrative**, the advocate puts a human face on the issue. The staff members in the meeting begin to empathize with James rather than feeling accused.

Page | 25

The advocate then connects the need for change to the school’s own stated values, essentially **reframing it as a moral imperative** that aligns with their mission. They might say, “I know this school believes in preparing every student for the real world – and that means every student should feel safe and supported here. If we adjust our approach for kids like James, we’re living up to that

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

mission of inclusivity and excellence.” By invoking the school’s mission (a kind of moral North Star for the institution), the advocate appeals to conscience and pride in a positive way.

Page | 26

As a result of this AMST-guided approach, instead of reacting defensively, the principal might be curious or even relieved. The conversation turns to solutions: perhaps reducing cafeteria noise, creating a quiet space for overwhelmed students, or training teachers on de-escalation techniques. Because the advocate avoided triggering a fight-or-flight response, the school’s energy can go into problem-solving rather than self-protection.

In this example, we see how observing first, partnering, focusing on systems, storytelling, and moral reframing all worked together to produce a better outcome for students.

Conclusion

Applied Moral Systems Theory offers a lens to see advocacy not as a zero-sum confrontation but as a thoughtful process of influencing complex human systems. By recognizing that institutions have “personalities” and primal responses, we can choose strategies that speak to the heart of the system. AMST reminds us that sustainable change often requires patience and insight: a blend of **scientific understanding** (how systems maintain equilibrium and how minds change) and **moral clarity** (why the change is necessary for justice and human dignity).

The Autism Advocacy Network advances this approach because we have seen it work. When advocates engage systems with respect, empathy,

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

and steady resolve, even entrenched practices can shift. Rather than triggering a defensive war, we create an invitation to grow. In doing so, we strive to transform the very environments that once excluded or harmed individuals into systems that learn, adapt, and ultimately, **do the right thing.**

Page | 29

Further Reading

For those interested in exploring the ideas behind AMST and System Psychology further, we recommend the following accessible and influential works. These books and articles come from diverse fields – law, education, neuroscience, behavioral economics, systems theory, and theology – yet each shares a piece of the intellectual DNA of our framework:

- **Law:** Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (Spiegel & Grau, 2014) – A compelling memoir by a civil-rights attorney that illustrates moral advocacy within the legal justice system, emphasizing empathy and human stories to reform a deeply flawed institution.
- **Education:** Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Seabury, 1970) – A classic work in education theory that argues for empowering the marginalized through dialogue and critical awareness, providing insight into how narratives and power structures shape systems like schools.

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

- **Neuroscience:** Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Viking, 2014) – An accessible overview of trauma research demonstrating how physiological stress responses (fight, flight, freeze) affect individuals; it offers metaphors and insights applicable to understanding collective or institutional trauma and the need for safety in change efforts.
- **Behavioral Economics:** Richard H. Thaler & Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (Penguin Books, 2008) – A foundational book in behavioral economics showing how small changes in choice architecture can gently influence behavior, resonating with our focus on subtle system tweaks that lead to moral outcomes.
- **Systems Theory:** Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (Chelsea Green, 2008) – An introduction to systems theory that explains how complex systems function and how leverage points can be used to create change, directly underpinning our view that understanding feedback loops and homeostasis is key to advocacy.

- **Theology:** Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932) – A theological and ethical treatise examining why individuals might act morally, but groups often behave less so; it underscores the importance of addressing justice at the systemic level and informs the moral reasoning behind AMST.

Addendum

A Practical Guide for Advocates, Educators, and
System Leaders

This addendum serves as a bridge between the philosophical foundation of Applied Moral Systems Theory and its practical application in the field. It is designed to help advocates, educators, and institutional leaders translate ethical insight into effective action, maintaining alignment between conscience and strategy.

1. Orientation: The Advocate as System Reader

The first task of an advocate is observation.

Systems reveal their nature through their routines, language, and emotional tone. Before you attempt to influence change, study the system's behavior as if you were learning a new organism. Identify where it senses, reacts, and decides.

Look for homeostasis, the self-protective rhythm that keeps the system steady. Every system resists change at first, not because it is bad, but because stability is its survival mechanism.

2. The Five Principles in Practice

Observe First:

Attend meetings, read policies, and listen before acting. Understanding context prevents unnecessary conflict.

Frame as Partner:

Begin every dialogue by identifying shared goals. Collaboration disarms defensiveness and opens doors to reform.

Critique Systems, Not People:

Focus on process and policy, not personalities. This builds trust and keeps attention on problem-solving.

Lead with Narrative:

Human stories reach where data cannot. Use narrative to illustrate systemic realities and create empathy.

Reframe with Moral Imperative:

Connect proposed changes to the system's own mission or stated values. Show that reform fulfills its purpose, not opposes it.

3. The Grounding Check

Before taking action, pause and ensure that your advocacy is grounded in truth and integrity. Use this self-assessment to maintain alignment:

Does my argument match observable reality?

Does it honor the dignity of every participant?

Does it serve restoration rather than retribution?

Is the change I propose sustainable within the system's capacity?

4. System Mapping Worksheet

Visualize the system as an ecosystem. Map its moving parts to locate leverage points for ethical change:

Inputs – Beliefs, policies, incentives that drive behavior.

Outputs – Observable actions, outcomes, and culture.

Feedback – Rewards, punishments, or stories that reinforce identity.

Leverage Points – Small shifts (training, funding, narrative) that yield large results.

5. Narrative Calibration

Every system runs on story. To realign a system, you must listen for the gap between its internal narrative and external reality. That gap is where advocacy begins.

Identify the dominant story the system tells about itself.

Listen for contradictions between that story and real outcomes.

Craft a bridging narrative that honors truth while preserving identity.

Anchor the new story in shared values and verifiable data.

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

Repeat calmly and consistently until the new story takes root.

Page | 40

6. Crisis-to-Equilibrium Protocol

During conflict or crisis, use this sequence to de-escalate and guide the system back to balance:

Pause – regulate yourself first.

Presence – communicate safety through tone and posture.

Perspective – restate shared purpose.

Propose – offer one lawful, constructive next step.

7. The Law of Narrative Equilibrium

Systems persist only while their internal narrative matches external reality. When that balance

Autism Advocacy Network Inc.

fractures, decline begins. The advocate's work is to keep narrative and reality in dialogue—to be the conscience, mirror, and translator between what a system says and what it does.

Page | 41

© **2025 Autism Advocacy Network, Inc.** Reproduction permitted for educational and advocacy purposes with attribution.