

Keeping Students Honest

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School districts across the country are dealing with the fallout from teachers tampering with standardized test scores. We're all under pressure to perform – adults and kids alike – but cheating is wrong. So why do we do it? And how can we change?

Seven out of 10 students admit to cheating, according to the Josephson Institute on Ethics. And now they've got some help - videos posted on the YouTube website that show kids how to cheat without getting caught.

"Hi YouTube, it's me Kiki," says a young teenage girl staring into her web camera. "Today I'm going to show you guys how to cheat on a test ... the effective way."

This video on YouTube is a tutorial for cheating.

"I know it's not a good thing to cheat," Kiki continues, "it's like academic dishonesty blah, blah, blah ... but you know, everyone, I think everyone has at least done it once."

Kids know cheating is wrong, but still they do it. Why?

"Sometimes the teacher doesn't give us enough time on our work and we run out of time," says one girl, "and we have no where else to go."

"Students do it because they, like, don't really care and they just want to get it done," says another girl, "so they can go play and stuff."

17-year-old Pat says he cheated on a class assignment. "It was almost like second nature," he says. "Not that I do it all the time, but you got to get it done. You don't want to get a bad grade, you're missing a couple of answers - here, scribble it down real quick."

The problem was his teacher saw the whole thing.

"She looked down at my papers and asked me what I was doing. I looked up - I mean, I knew I was caught."

He got detention, a one-day suspension and a zero on the assignment.

Did he learn a valuable lesson?

"You kind of learn to work the system," Pat says. "Basically, by the time you're a sophomore or junior you know the system and how to get around it. I mean, I know - I do try and do my homework. But if I'm going to cheat – quote-unquote cheat - I'll do that before I get into class, instead of sitting right there in class where it's very noticeable."

Experts say parents need to help kids focus on internal rewards rather than constant praise and recognition from outsiders. Whether it's academics or sports, scores aren't everything – and they don't mean a thing if you've cheated.

"You're ignoring that fact that you're not really achieving anything," says Hal Thorsrud, an assistant professor of philosophy. "It's not an achievement to get a paper off of an Internet website. So, the best, I suppose the best way to confront the plagiarism problem in the long run is to really focus on the value of education. Just remove the desire to cheat, because you're not going to remove the means."

12-year-old Jessica says her parents have taught her the difference. "I think that you cheat yourself and you cheat everyone else when you cheat," she says. "You're using someone else's credit, so you cheat both that person and yourself - cause it's not your own work."

Back in her bedroom, looking into her webcam, Kiki acknowledges that what she's posting online is probably wrong and may get her in some trouble, "Hopefully my teachers do not see this video, cause that would be very awkward."

What Parents Need To Know

The most recent Josephson Institute Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth reveals entrenched habits of dishonesty in today's young people. A substantial majority (64 percent) cheated on a test during the past year (38 percent did so two or more times), up from 60 percent and 35 percent in 2006. There were no gender differences on the issue of cheating on exams.

Despite these high levels of dishonesty, these same kids have a high self-image when it comes to ethics. Ninety-three percent said they were satisfied with their personal ethics and character and 77 percent said that "when it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know."

When discussing issues of morality and values, how can a parent illustrate what it means to be a person of character? The Center for the 4th and 5th R's provides the following examples of characteristics of an individual with a positive character. For example, a person of character ...

Is trustworthy:

Honesty – Tell the truth. Be sincere. Don't deceive, mislead or be devious or tricky. Don't betray a trust. Don't withhold important information in relationships of trust. Don't steal. Don't cheat.

Integrity – Stand up for your beliefs about right and wrong. Be your best self. Resist social pressures to do things you think are wrong. Walk your talk. Show commitment, courage and self-discipline.

Promise-keeping – Keep your word. Honor your commitments. Pay your debts. Return what you borrow.

Loyalty – Stand by, support, and protect your family, friends, employers, community and country. Don't talk behind people's backs, spread rumors, or engage in harmful gossip. Don't violate other ethical principles to keep or win a friendship or gain approval. Don't ask a friend to do something wrong.

Treats all people with respect:

Respect – Be courteous and polite. Judge all people on their merits. Be tolerant, appreciative and accepting of individual differences. Don't abuse, demean or mistreat anyone. Don't use, manipulate, exploit or take advantage of others. Respect the right of individuals to make decisions about their own lives.

Acts responsibly:

Accountability – Think before you act. Consider the possible consequences on all people affected by actions. Think for the long-term. Be reliable. Be accountable. Accept responsibility for the consequences of your choices. Don't make excuses. Don't blame others for your mistakes or take credit for others' achievements. Set a good example for those who look up to you.

Pursue excellence – Do your best with what you have. Keep trying. Don't quit or give up easily. Be diligent and industrious.

Self-control – Exercise self-control. Be disciplined.

Is fair and just:

Fairness – Treat all people fairly. Be open-minded. Listen to others and try to understand what they are saying and feeling. Make decisions which affect others only on appropriate considerations. Don't take unfair advantage of others' mistakes. Don't take more than your fair share.

Experts urge parents to demonstrate good character in their own actions and take advantage of "teachable moments," discussing with children whether good or bad character is modeled by others in daily life, in the media and online.