

Cheat Sheet

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Recently I was listening to a radio commentary by the Michael Josephson who is the founding president of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. He has a daily radio program called the Character Counts Network. Over the course of two weeks he dealt with the issue of dishonesty and cheating that is so prevalent among young people. This week's article is an exposition of that topic that he shared. As we start the new year of 2006 I want us to focus on this very subject.

If you think your teenagers don't cheat in school, you're in the majority of parents. But a survey of more than 12,000 teenagers across the United States indicated that more than 7 out of 10 cheated on a test in the past year. The national average was 74 percent, up 13 points from a decade ago.

Now you're probably thinking, my teens are among the 3 out of 10 who didn't cheat because they've been raised in church and know cheating is wrong. Guess what? The survey asked questions to see if attending a church-based school or attending church regularly made a difference. And it did! Students in church-affiliated schools and those who attend church regularly admitted cheating is wrong, but more of them admitted to cheating on a test at least once in the past year—78 percent! (*I*)

Cheating has become so pervasive that some researchers believe it amounts to a moral crisis in this country. And savvy teens are utilizing high-tech methods to get the results they want.

Do your teens have cell phones? Do those phones have cameras? How about PDAs with cameras? Do your teens have Internet access? All these increasingly essential tools, which can aid in study, are also being used to cheat. Instant messaging during tests with an agreed-upon code and taking photographs of the test and e-mailing the photo to other students with the answers in place are just two high-tech ways to cheat. And downloading essays from the Internet is becoming old hat.

Why Teens Cheat

About now you are probably asking, "Why are so many teens cheating without remorse?" The answer is as multifaceted as the ways teens are cheating.

1. Teens cheat because they don't think it's wrong. Take Trent for example. He was struggling with Spanish, and someone told him about a great Web site. There he found everything he needed to complete a homework assignment. With the click of a mouse his homework was done—and much more accurate and creative than if he had used only his text and a dictionary. If you asked Trent if he considered this cheating, he'd be shocked.

2. Teens cheat because they are busy. Sarah goes straight from school three days a week to the nearby mall, where she works until the store closes. Once a week she has a gymnastics lesson, and another day she has a singing lesson. One season a year she's a cheerleader, and at least two Saturdays a month she baby sits her younger brother. She gets stressed about her homework, so on Sunday afternoons she meets with a study group. They divide their homework so they can get it done more quickly. Sarah admits this may be cheating, but it's also a matter of survival. Since everyone in her group does it, how bad can it be? After all, they don't cheat on tests.

3. Teens cheat because it's easy to do. Todd attends a large regional high school. Some of his teachers don't even know his name. Most of his tests are designed to be fast to grade or to be graded on the computer. This means multiple-choice and short-answer tests. Todd and his friends have developed codes for sharing the answers. And someone always finds a way to get an extra copy of the test to a friend in a later period. What does Todd think about cheating? "It's the teacher's fault. If the school cared about kids' helping one another on tests, the teachers wouldn't make it so easy to share the answers."

4. Teens cheat because the pressure to cheat is intense. Shelley wants to go to law school—and not just any law school. She's narrowed her selection to a few of the finest schools in the nation. Her parents can't afford the tuition, so competition is intense for limited scholarship funds. Both Shelley and her parents stay stressed out about it. She's afraid to bring home a B because of the reaction she'll get from her parents. Does Shelley know she's cheating? Yes, she'll respond quickly. But what can she do? She feels she must excel in every subject and add lots of extracurricular activities to build a student resume that demonstrates how versatile and talented she is. Shelley says she must cheat to compete.

5. Teens cheat because they feel entitled to the best. Mark plays a different sport every season. Handsome, smart, popular—he has it all. He could study and make great grades, but he believes an athlete like him deserves the help he gets on homework, tests too. Why shouldn't those nerdy types help him out? After all, he brings fame to the school by ensuring their team wins. Turn about is fair play—isn't it?

6. Teens cheat because they see cheating modeled everywhere. During a phone conversation, Chris overheard his dad saying, "I'll just say I have an appointment tomorrow afternoon and meet you at the golf course at 2:00." Then Chris saw a sitcom with a plot about deception between friends. He turned on his computer to play a new video game. He was having a tough time with the game, but found dozens of Web sites about "cheating" to win the new game. While he was looking for game clues, he also found hundreds of sites with tips about how to cheat in school and even electronic equipment to make cheating easier.

(1). "The Ethics of American Youth," Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2002 Report Card [online], [cited 18 July 2004].

What Parents Can Do

Talk with your teens and help them clearly understand cheating. They may understand that copying another student's test paper is wrong; they may not make the same connection that it's wrong to download an entire report from the Internet.

- Help your teens understand that cheating is both lying and stealing, and that both are wrong in God's eyes. That will be a more effective deterrent than all the logic you offer. Discuss how lying and cheating hurt relationships with peers, adults, and with God.
- Walk your talk. How far do you go in helping your teens with homework and special projects? Do you help them, or do you do most of the work for them? Do you cut corners with the truth? Did your teenager hear you tell the patrolman that you were only driving 35 in the 30 mile zone when you were actually driving 40? Did they hear you say something about fudging on your income tax? If so, students will have difficulty differentiating between your actions and their getting help with homework because there's no difference between "shades" of dishonesty.
- Teach healthy competition. Teach your teens to run the race well but not to feel that they must win every time—at all costs. They may not like cheating but feel that it's safer than making you unhappy because they don't make the honor roll. And remember: Both rewards for good grades and punishment for bad grades can have negative effects. Do reward improvements and good efforts. Don't make your teens feel ashamed for not making the best grades. Be honest with yourself about your child's abilities, and don't make your expectations unrealistic. The line between encouragement and pressure differs with every child.
- Stay involved. The only way you'll know about the pressures your teenagers are experiencing, the solutions they're considering, and their ideas about how to reach those goals is to listen and stay involved. With your help and encouragement, your students can move that C for cheating to an E for excellence and effort.