

Your Cheatin' Teen: How to Deal When Kids Cheat

By Laura Kastner

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I don't know who was more contrite: the 16-year-old girl or the parent. They both confessed that the mom had written all the essays for her daughter's internship application.

It wasn't the first time this mom had masqueraded as her daughter. Homework tampering was routine, and when the double helix of anxiety and grade worries spiraled, mom would end up writing entire papers.

And we wonder about the origins of the cheating epidemic among teens?

This widespread trend (one 2012 study reports that 51 percent of 23,000 high school students sampled admitted to cheating on a test) is related to multiple factors: Kids feel pressure to achieve, anxiety about their futures, and less stigma about cheating. Believing "everybody does it" soothes the guilt pangs. Since the stats show these cheaters are half-right, parents have an uphill challenge pushing the honesty agenda.

Middle school students cheat more than elementary students because of increased pressures to get high grades. According to Eric Anderman, Ph.D., of Ohio State University, kids who feel their school values academic performance (good grades, high test scores, being smart) over learning are more likely to cheat. Whatever happened to valuing curiosity, understanding and trial-and-error learning?

Thanks to today's high-tech world, it's easier for kids to cheat—it just takes a few finger strokes of the keypad for someone to cut, paste and plagiarize. And texting is accessible and ubiquitous, as officials at New York City's well-known Stuyvesant High School discovered when students traded answers during the statewide, standardized Regents Examinations last year.

High-stakes cheating

Back in the day (the dark ages of our youth), it was the struggling student who was most likely to venture to the dark side of cheating.

Not these days. Now, countless high-performing students are joining the cheating throngs, claiming they have to resort to deception and dishonesty to compete in the cutthroat, competitive college-admissions game.

Educational Testing Service researchers report that 86 percent of high school students believe that most students cheat at some point—and that between 75 and 98 percent of college students say they've cheated in high school.

In my clinical practice, I hear the classic excuses during conversations with teens: "I'll just die if my grade point drops by making a 'B' [or C or D]"; "If I don't make good grades, my parents will take away Facebook"; "It's the only way I'll get into a decent college"; "Since everyone else does it, I'm screwed if I don't do it too"; and "I need to keep up with my friends."

The most poignant? "My parents are obsessed with grades—they say that they just want me to do my best, but what they really mean is that they will freak out if I don't make mostly A's."

Taking a stand

What can parents do? They need to take a strong stand—and make it clear to their teens that representing work taken from another source as their own is cheating. This includes lifting content without citation from reference material, purchasing a paper online or copying homework.

When we see parents who find their child has cheated and insist that he or she confess to a teacher, we should consider them heroic. That's because their child usually learns a triple-whammy moral lesson: the importance of honesty, the moral consistency of the parent model, and the compassionate response of an elder when a student and parent take the principled road less traveled.

And what happened to our mommy-daughter cheating duo? They're in recovery. Yes, they've had some slips, but mom swears that she won't bail her daughter out at the eleventh hour (or at 1 or 2 a.m.) and finish her papers. And it is as hard for the daughter to go it alone as it is for the mother not to come to the rescue. They are intertwined in an anxiety dance that tricks them into thinking that the daughter is in a life-threatening situation if she turns in mediocre work: C's! Community college! Depression! A lifetime of poverty, slacker marriage prospects or worse!

This scenario is not uncommon—and getting away with cheating encourages more of the same. The reality is, cheaters are frightened to embrace honest outcomes. Reform at the individual, family and school levels requires community-wide, outspoken support for valuing learning more than grades, honesty over a conspiracy of silence, and the courage to buck the cheating trend.

As parents, we need to spotlight honesty and fair play while sympathizing with the perpetual pressures our teens feel. Simply moralizing about fairness and honesty at the dinner table isn't enough. We should support our kids' commitment to hard work (work that's their own) and encourage them to resist that temptation to cheat.

Laura Kastner, Ph.D., is a clinical professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Washington, psychologist in private practice and author of *Wise-Minded Parenting: 7 Essentials for Raising Successful Tweens + Teens*.

HELPING YOUR TEEN RESIST THE URGE TO CHEAT

Talk about the cheating trends with your children.

Tell your child the importance of honesty and that you'd rather have him prioritize learning and get a B than cheat and get an A.

Examine the values of your school. Get involved if it is preoccupied with tests, grades and status and not taking the necessary precautions against cheating, burnout and extreme competition.

Address your own parental anxiety about your children feeling pressured by you to make high grades. Ask them!

Is your child overscheduled and feeling tempted to cheat because she can't possibly get everything done? Decompress and delete . . . something!