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Exploring Character

**Real Life Scenarios That Will
Get Students Talking about
Values, Choices, and Behavior**

R. E. Myers



Dedication

To Kathleen, with love and admiration.

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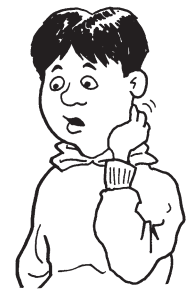
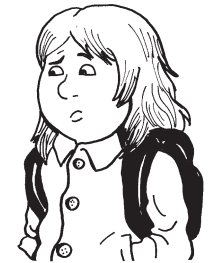
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Introduction

You'll often hear people talk about character and the important role that schools play in teaching students about good character traits. In fact, many adults appear to feel that schools bear a major responsibility for teaching our youth such concepts as trustworthiness, loyalty, respect, honesty, and courage. This notion is hardly radical because in every society adults have tried to inculcate the values they deem most important in young people. Moreover, the idea is practical, because how our students regard these concepts affects everything they do in school and out of school—from cheating with the aid of electronics, to engaging in a riot at a football game, to participating in programs for the needy.

These days students have an enormous number of choices to make, and making those choices is the means of developing character. Like it or not, teachers must deal with the choices their students are making. By discussing in class the dilemmas that students face, your students will become better able to make the right choices. What follows is an attempt to involve your students in thinking seriously about the elements that make up the character of a responsible individual in our society.

How to Use This Book

Each of the units in this book is meant to stimulate in-depth discussion of one or more dilemmas. Accordingly, what's most important is what happens after your students read the story and then reflect on it.

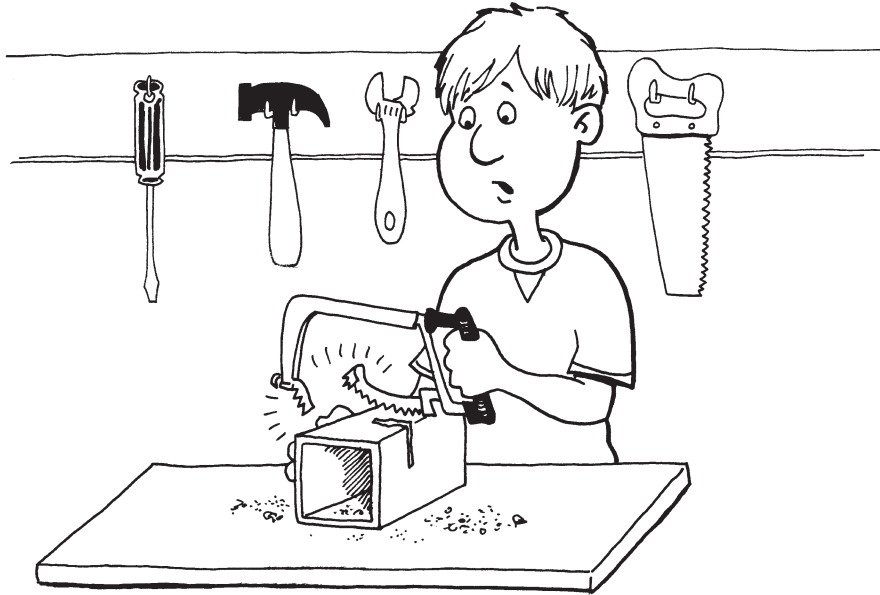
There are three ways that you can present a story. You can read it to the class. Your students can read it silently on their own. Or you can have one or more of your students read it to the class. In choosing one of the three procedures, you should consider the story's relevance to your students' lives and its probable impact upon them.

Whichever way you choose to present the story, it is important that you set the stage properly. A certain amount of warm-up is necessary if you want students in the mood to think about subjects such as cheating, being fair, and trying hard. You can bring up the subject by citing a newspaper article or a personal anecdote, or you can simply make a remark or ask a question that leads in to the topic.

An activity or exercise follows each story. These activities are intended as a way to get students talking about the ideas and issues brought out by the story. This will provoke your students into deeper thinking, and some of the thinking will bring forth insights.

You do not have to teach the units in any particular order, and you do not need to teach every unit. Please select only those units that are most pertinent or topical to your students, so they gain a better understanding of what having good character means and how they display good character in their choices, actions, and attitudes. And, by all means, feel free to modify anything in this book that will make it more appropriate for your students.

The Broken Blade



Gary decided to make a metal box to give to his father on his birthday. He didn't have very many tools at home, and so he asked his friend Luke if he could borrow a couple of his tools to finish up the box. Luke told him to come around any time and use the tools he had in the little shop that his father had in the garage. So one Saturday Gary went over to Luke's house, which was only two blocks away. He rang the doorbell to let Luke or his parents know he was going to use the tools in the shop. No one was at home, and so Gary went into the shop and found a hacksaw he needed to cut off a part of the box. After some strenuous sawing, Gary was surprised and appalled that the blade of the hacksaw snapped.

More than anything, Gary was embarrassed because he hadn't used the tool properly. He didn't know what to do. There were no other hacksaw blades around the shop that he could see. He decided the best course of action would be to go to the hardware store and buy a hacksaw blade. And that is what he did. When he returned to Luke's shop with a hacksaw blade, he replaced the broken one and tucked it into his shirt. Then he finished work on the box and quickly went home.

On Monday, at school, Luke asked Gary if he had been able to come over and work on that box. Gary stammered a bit, and then said that he had and thanked Luke for the use of the hacksaw. When he replaced the broken blade, he had noticed that the one he bought wasn't exactly the same as the original one. He wondered if Luke or his father would notice. Gary was too embarrassed about the incident to tell Luke what had happened. He made a remark about playing baseball after school and then got away.



Name _____

Date _____

The Broken Blade: Student Responses

Think about your answers to the following questions and write your response to each.

1. Should Gary keep quiet about the broken hacksaw blade, or should he tell Luke the next time he sees him?

2. Hacksaw blades aren't hard to break if you are inexperienced in using the tool. Do you think Luke knows this and wouldn't think much about the incident?

3. Do you think it was silly of Gary to be so embarrassed at breaking the blade? Explain.

4. What would you have done if you were Gary?

The Broken Blade

Truthfulness

The Story

The problem of “owning up” to our mistakes is a serious and recurrent one. Teachers learn early that trying to cover up a mistake in front of a class makes matters worse. Teachers don’t have to be infallible know-it-alls, and students don’t expect them to be. Similarly, admitting a mistake is very difficult for some young people. Gary was one of these. He was embarrassed at having been given the privilege of using some hand tools by his friend and then breaking the blade of the hacksaw he was using. He didn’t know it then, but most likely Luke or his father had broken a blade not too long before. Accomplished craftsmen don’t break them, but ordinary do-it-yourselfers do. At any rate, Gary tried to cover up his misadventure with the hacksaw. He was apprehensive about being found out and had a guilty conscience.

Only by having experiences of this kind as they mature will students realize that confessing to a mistake and being truthful about the incident is much easier than covering up. Most of your students should have had an experience similar to Gary’s, and you might gently encourage them to offer analogous anecdotes.

The Questions

The first question has to do with the wisdom of telling or not telling Luke about the broken blade. The majority of your students will see the advantages of Gary’s confessing that he had broken the blade and replaced it. Most of them will probably think that replacing the blade made everything all right. Challenge them about this point, however. If replacing the blade made everything all right, why was Gary so reluctant to tell Luke about the incident?

The second question invites your students to conjecture about the frequency with which hacksaw blades get broken. A few of your students may have some knowledge about hand tools that they can share.

The third question gets at the heart of the problem: Why was Gary so embarrassed by his breaking the blade? Is he an average, ordinary boy, or is he especially sensitive and perhaps proud? Maybe he’s just someone who hates very much to be in the wrong.

The last question might best be answered in private so that the student can give an honest answer. Many of your students will be eager to give their opinion about how they would have handled the incident, however, and some will be frank to say that Gary is probably a “wimp.”

An Activity Exploring Truthfulness

The activity following the story allows your students to probe more deeply into Gary's problem and its ramifications. "Stretching It," on page 7, explores the use of half-truths and falsehoods in writing and speaking to the public. It addresses the purposes of the fiction writer as well as those of the propagandist and apologist. In public life a very great amount of soul-searching and finger-pointing is often conducted under the banner of "revealing the truth." Are there times when the public should be told falsehoods, or are there other times when it is better if the public doesn't know the entire truth?

The key word in "Stretching It" is *lying*. How your students interpret the word will have a lot to do with how they react to the seven situations presented, all of which have some dubious and/or devious verbal responses. One or two of the seven situations may hit home. Hopefully, your students will recognize these commonplace instances of avoiding telling the truth.

This is how a strict judging of the truthfulness of the seven responses might be interpreted:

1. Embellishing a story is a mild kind of lying because it isn't being completely factual. It's a form of exaggerating, but because it isn't truthful, we can say it is lying.
2. Omitting critical facts falls in the area of misrepresentation or dishonesty. It isn't lying. Nevertheless, the intent is very close.
3. Shifting the blame to another person is dishonorable and reprehensible, but it isn't exactly lying.
4. "What pie?" is evasive and very much like lying when the person asking the question is guilty of eating that pie. Strictly speaking, it isn't lying.
5. Changing the subject slightly is a common tactic employed by people who want to avoid telling the truth, but it isn't lying.
6. "Uh-huh" translates to "Yes," and so it is lying.
7. Obviously, giving a false age is lying, no matter how old the individual is.

After the students have each responded, hold a class discussion of your students' reactions. Point out that in each case an individual wants to avoid telling the truth. That generalization shouldn't escape any of your students.