

Why Adolescents Cheat in School and What to Do

When adolescents cheat in school, they hurt themselves.

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The psychological formula for cheating at school is simply this: **cheating = sneaking + lying + stealing**. You sneak to conceal what you are up to. You lie about what you have done. And you steal credit for performance you did not earn. So **there are three ethical violations** in one when you cheat by plagiarizing papers, copying homework, procuring answers on tests, or altering records.

Many adolescents will tell you there is nothing "wrong" with cheating. Because adolescence is a counter cultural period of growth, **young people can see the adult run "system" as the enemy to oppose and also to manipulate**. This is why "beating the system" is one common goal in adolescence. It shows how a young person is smarter than the ruling authorities and can get away with ignoring, getting around, or breaking rules that they impose.

Cheating in school - on homework, on papers, on tests, on records - symbolically represents this rebellious power. Today's battle between teachers and students over the various subversive uses of cell phones (and other hand

held devices) in school is one arena where this opposition is currently being played out.

I have heard other adolescent *rationales*¹ for cheating in addition to "beating the system." "Everybody does it sometimes." **That's the majority rule rationale.** "It's stupid to play by the rules when others don't because you put yourself at a disadvantage." That's the 'keep up with **competition rationale.** "With so much pressure and stress from work, I need all the shortcuts I can get." **That's the efficiency rationale.** Then the one that really set me back was this. "My parents would rather I get dishonest A than an honest B." **That's the ambitious parents' rationale.**

From what I have seen, low motivated students tend to cheat the least because cheating takes more effort than simply not doing the work at all. Moderate achieving students tend to cheat to get out of doing their own work. High achieving students tend to cheat for competitive advantage as they strive to get ahead.

Teachers tend to let possible cheating go because it takes special surveillance to detect, and they avoid confronting or sanctioning a cheater **because that can entail a conference with defensive and angry parents.** **Policing cheating can take and stir up a lot of trouble.**

So how should school deal with cheating? Here I have to give a double message: accept that it will go on **but take an official position against it.** **Accept that with all the rationales adolescent students have, many young people will perceive it as an accepted way to get out of work and to get ahead.** However, set and communicate school policies and procedures to prohibit it for students to live up to. **School staff must set an adult cultural**

¹ **Rationale:** motivazione, base logica

norm that opposes cheating to compete with the adolescent norm that can support it.

As for encouraging students to report other students who are cheating to uphold the school honor system, there is little positive incentive for students to do so. The cultural rationales for cheating are in place, and more important, informing on another student is not likely to win friends, and may result in some social reprisal. **There is no glory from turning in a peer.**

The problem is, however, that the experience of growing up is a formative one. **Now = later. The adolescent of today is the adult of tomorrow. Therefore, cheating one's way through school can encourage cheating one's way through life.** I believe parents and teachers do have a responsibility for encouraging ethical behavior in adolescence that encourages ethical behavior in adulthood.

If getting students to police the cheating of other students is not the best option for the school, there is another. **Teach students to police their own cheating behavior.** Why would they want to do that? **Because of the psychological costs that accompany cheating.**

The interesting thing about the student rationales for cheating is why they are necessary at all. Because they are self-justifying these defenses are all evidence of how most adolescents, on some level, experience cheating as an act doing something "wrong." **So by cheating, you are creating an ethical conflict within your self.**

In addition, when you cheat to beat the system, you are cheating (unfairly competing) with people who are not cheating. **So cheating is not only anti-authority; it is anti-peer (even your friends.)** It's like the athletes who dope when playing against those who don't. **Cheating puts you at an unfair**

advantage. The example that a lot of students can relate to is doping in sports, where athletes rely on performance enhancing drugs to elevate their play.

Then there are other costs. Cheating lowers self-esteem. **It is an admission that you don't have the will or capacity** it takes to meet a performance demand or challenge by dealing with it honestly and directly through your own efforts. **Cheating creates ignorance.** You get the answers without ever learning to work on the questions. **And of course, cheating creates jeopardy.** Cheaters have to live with the fear. They worry about being found out, caught, and punished.

Finally, cheating puts you in a false position. The appearance or reputation of competence and knowledge you create is very different from the secret reality only you know. **This is why a cheater can feel like a fraud.**

A high school counselor once told me an example of this cost. She said a student who had graduated five years before came back to her because his history had finally caught up with him. "I cheated my way through high school," he confessed, "then college, and now I'm accepted into medical school, and I don't know all that I'm supposed to know. What should I do?" The counselor's advice: "Delay your admission for one or two years to actually study what you missed, and **never cheat on yourself again.**" And her final phrase has always stuck with me. **Cheating is ultimately an offense against oneself.**

So if your teenager decides to cheat at school, at least tell the young person this. "Cheating is powerfully instructive and personally harmful. **Cheating to get out of doing school work or to get ahead teaches you to treat yourself like a sneak, a liar, and a thief.**"

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