

# Thinking About Character

By Michael Josephson, Founder, CHARACTER COUNTS!

**I**magine that you're taking a big test at the end of the year. You really want to do well on it. You're stuck on a few questions—answers you know will make the difference between a good grade and a possible poor grade. You look up from your test and realize that you can clearly read the answers from the student sitting next to you. You're now faced with a choice. Do you copy the answers or do you go back to staring at your own sheet?

You consider the choices. You know that, if you cheat, you probably won't get caught. And, you think to yourself, copying a few answers is relatively harmless. Who does it hurt? And, besides, everyone does it, right?



**Every day you are faced with choices that test your character.**

So, what do you do?

Your honest answer to this question will tell you a great deal about your character. Your answer reflects not only what you know is right and wrong, but also how you *act* with what you know.

You are faced with important choices every day. Some choices are “preference choices”—for example, what to wear to school, what to buy for lunch, or what to buy your dad for his birthday. Other choices are “ethical choices.” These choices are about what’s right and wrong. These are the choices that reflect character.

Ethics play a part in more daily decisions than you may think. The test-taking scenario is only one example of an ethical choice.

You are faced with ethical choices every day. One of the main goals of this series is to show you how to recognize which choices are ethical choices. Another main goal is to show you how to make the right ethical choices.

### About Being Ethical

Being ethical isn't simply about what is allowed—or legal—and what is not. You can often find a legal way to do what is unethical. Maybe you saw that a cashier at the grocery store forgot to ring up one of your items. There is no law that says you must tell him or her. But, is it ethical to just walk out without mentioning it? The answer is no. You're still being dishonest by taking something you did not pay for.

So, being ethical is about something more than “what you can get away with.” It is about what you do because *you know it's the right thing to do*—regardless of who's watching and regardless of whether you may stand to gain. Often there is a price to pay for doing the right thing.

### Character Takes Courage

There are many obstacles to being ethical—chances are you're faced with some of them every day. Maybe you don't want to be



**There are many obstacles to being ethical. Overcoming them takes courage and hard work.**

embarrassed by telling the truth. Or maybe you feel doing the right thing will take too much effort. Few good things come without a cost. Becoming a person of character is hard work. Here is a poem I wrote that makes this point.

## **It's Not Easy**

*Let's be honest. Ethics is not for wimps.*

*It's not easy being a good person.*

*It's not easy to be honest when it might be costly, to play fair when others cheat or to keep inconvenient promises.*

*It's not easy to stand up for our beliefs and still respect differing viewpoints.*

*It's not easy to control powerful impulses, to be accountable for our attitudes and actions, to tackle unpleasant tasks or to sacrifice the now for later.*

*It's not easy to bear criticism and learn from it without getting angry, to take advice or to admit error.*

*It's not easy to really feel genuine remorse and apologize sincerely, or to accept an apology graciously and truly forgive.*

*It's not easy to stop feeling like a victim, to resist cynicism and to make the best of every situation.*

*It's not easy to be consistently kind, to think of others first, to judge generously, to give the benefit of the doubt.*

*It's not easy to be grateful or to give without concern for reward or gratitude.*

*It's not easy to fail and still keep trying, to learn from failure, to risk failing again, to start over, to lose with grace or to be glad for the success of another.*

*It's not easy to avoid excuses and rationalizations or to resist temptations.*

*No, being a person of character is not easy.*

***That's why it's such a lofty goal and an admirable achievement.***

## **Character Is Worth It!**

I sincerely hope that you will learn and use the ideas of CHARACTER COUNTS! The books in this series will show you the core values (the Six Pillars) of good character. These values will help you in all aspects of your life—and for many years to come. I encourage you to use these ideas as a kind of “guide-rail” on your journey to adulthood. With “guide-rails,” your journey is more likely to bring you to a place where you can be a truly good, happy, and ethical person.



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