

Navigating the Academic Pressure at Whitman

adapted from a the CAC Presentation - "Talking to Teens about Values" by

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The academic climate at Whitman is unusual in that many students consider it "cool" to do well academically. This is wonderful because many students strive to achieve at a high level, but the extremely competitive academic environment also has negative side-effects. One of these is the pressure students may feel to cheat in order to get better grades.

The pressure and temptation to cheat come from a variety of sources. For one, students under academic stress sometimes feel they are receiving competing messages: "Getting accepted into a good college is paramount" but "cheating is wrong." For another, the emphasis in some classes on group projects can sometimes blur the line between when it is acceptable to share work and when it is not. Also, students can be tempted or pressured to help friends who are experiencing high academic stress.

As adults and parents it is important for us to help our students develop a love of learning and not try to "game the system" throughout high school. To help students avoid cheating, parents need to take on both the perceived need to get good grades "no matter what" in order to get into a "good" college, and the current ethic that cheating is not necessarily wrong. Some steps for accomplishing this:

1. **Communicate your values to your teen.**

We often show and communicate pride when our teens succeed at school, sports, arts, etc. But how often have you said to your teen "I'm really impressed with your honesty, your caring, your character"? Be impressed with your student's character, not just academic achievement. Find things to value in your child. Think about the character traits you admire and discuss them with your teen.

2. **Be realistic about your teen's abilities.**

Students should be encouraged to judge themselves based on their own progress (horizontal achievement), rather than measuring themselves against their peers (vertical achievement). Parents should give their children the courage to be imperfect. At Whitman, every student feels they must be spectacular at something; however, not everyone is cut out to be an astrophysicist. Encourage your students to continually strive to improve themselves, not compete with their classmates.

3. **Be alert to signs of stress.**

If your student is feeling overwhelmed, consult a school counselor and/or take a look at the Whitman tip sheet Dealing with Stress (#9).

4. **Take care with the college conversation.**

Don't get caught up in the college ranking system. You and your student should be looking for colleges that are a good fit.

5. **Help your teen with time management and other skills to avoid being overwhelmed.**

Look at the big picture and consider all of your student's activities (sports, religious activities, community service, etc.) when considering their course load. (Refer to the Whitman tip sheet on Course Scheduling, #3)

6. **Consider course load and it's appropriateness to your teen's and family's priorities.**

Talk about the importance of family time, free time, community involvement, and religious involvement. Students don't cheat in subjects where they want to learn the material. Make sure your student's learning is heartfelt, and encourage them to take classes they will enjoy. Don't let your student think all of their life meaning hinges on college acceptances and career choices.

7. **Keep an eye on online schoolwork. Define plagiarism.**
Avoid putting computers and televisions in teen's rooms. Put them in common spaces where you can supervise their use.
8. **Be honest in the amount of help you give – where is the line at home?**
It can be difficult to define how much help is too much help. Each student differs on the amount of assistance they need. Parents should help the minimum amount. If you have a hard time determining how much help to give, consult your student's teachers.
9. **Go over school rules and consequences. Emphasize your support of the school policies.**
Make sure students understand that cheating is a violation of trust that victimizes themselves, their friends, and the entire community. Trust is crucial in all relationships.
10. **Keep lines of communication open between teens, teachers, and staff.**
Encourage your teen to handle their own issues directly with teachers and their school counselor. Teach them self-advocacy. Be supportive of the student/teacher relationship.
11. **If you get information about misconduct, take some time before you react.**
The parental default reaction tends to be a "Mama Bear" response - defend your child first and ask questions later. However, it is important to get all the facts on both sides of the problem.
12. **Be a good model for moral behavior.**
Your teen learns more from your actions than your talk. Emulate the behavior you want to encourage in them. Talk about your opinions on ethical dilemmas and share how you make ethical decisions.
13. **Use ethical dilemmas to discuss right and wrong.**
Don't put teens on the hot seat by directly confronting them about issues. Instead, discuss the ethical dilemmas that arise in everyday life. Use ethical dilemmas from your work, current events, television dramas, or books. Help your teen to understand that most situations are not black and white.

Resource Books:

Raising Good Children, Thomas Lickona

Educating for Character, Thomas Lickona

Setting Limits, Robert MacKenzie

Raising Respectful Kids in a Rude World, Gary McKay

Local Support:

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Promote Honesty: Dealing with Lying, Stealing and Sneaky Behavior

Developmental Issues: Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Reasoning

- Stage 0: "Whatever I want is what's fair." Ages 0 – 4.
 - Highly egocentric, "I want it, it's mine."
- Stage 1: "You should do what you're told." Ages 4 – 7.
 - Obedience and cooperation, "Will I get in trouble?"
- Stage 2: "What's in it for me?" Ages 7 – 12.
 - Moves back towards independence and individuality.
 - Think of themselves as moral equals of adults, shouldn't boss kids around.
 - Reduced fear of adult authority, insensitive to the feelings of others
- Stage 3: "What will people think of me?" Ages 11 up.
 - Being a good person means living up to your internalized image of what a nice person does.
 - Are more forgiving and flexible in their moral judgment, consider circumstances.
 - Conscience is inner and other directed – peers may set standards.
- Stage 4: "What if everybody did it?" Ages 16-.
 - Believe that being a good person includes carrying out their responsibilities to the social systems.
- Stage 5: "Respect the rights of every person." Adult.
 - Believe that what's right is to show the greatest possible respect for the human rights of others and to support a social system that protects those rights.

Prevention

- Understanding the goals of the misbehavior
 - Attention
 - Power
 - Revenge
 - Assumed Disability
- Supervision: Strategies to help your child deal with temptations

Setting Limits

- Young kids think that they are getting punished because they got caught, not because of the behavior – so they develop strategies to avoid getting caught.
- Making a distinction between punishments and consequences
 - Creating appropriate consequences: Reasonable, Related, Respectful
 - Rebuilding trust

Parent Strategies for encouraging honesty

- Don't entrap your child in lies or dishonesty – if you know they did it, say it that way.
- Talk about the importance of the whole truth. Help your child by asking for additional details or information on how the situation may have appeared to others involved.
- Consider the issue of forgiveness. Especially when the child does understand the seriousness of the situation. What do you want your child to learn for the situation? Have they? How can you help them move on?
- Avoid using labels (ADHD, intense, sensitive....) as an excuse for misbehavior. Are you advocating too much for your child to receive special treatment?
- Be aware of how you react when someone reports your child's misbehavior to you.
- Are apologies an easy out in your family? What does "I'm sorry" really mean? Model the behaviors you want to see.

Creating a family dialogue about ethics and empathy

- How honest are you? What are the typical things parents lie to their children about?
- What does it mean to be honest? Why does it matter if we are honest?
- Using dilemmas to discuss moral reasoning.
- Using dilemmas to teach empathy.
- Stimulating conversations:
 - I never know how to decide what to do when _____
 - The toughest decision I ever had to make was _____
 - I don't want to lose my friends, but I disagree with them about _____
- Use books, movies and tv shows to discuss impact of behaviors
 - What would you have done?
 - How did her behavior affect her family, friends...?

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Reasoning

Ethical Dilemmas

One of the most famous examples that was used by Kohlberg in his research is the Heinz dilemma. Here is the story: In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought would save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about half of the cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." (Bee, 1995).

The question was then asked of the research subjects, "Should Heinz steal the drug? Why or why not?" From Kohlberg's point of view, what the participant thinks Heinz should do is not important. The important thing is the justification of the action. Examples of possible arguments that belong to each of the six stages are as follows:

- Stage one: Heinz should not steal the medicine for fear of being put into prison.
- Stage two: Heinz should steal the medicine because he will be much happier if his wife is healed.
- Stage three: Heinz should steal the medicine because his wife expects him to do so.
- Stage four: Heinz should not steal the medicine because stealing is against the law.
- Stage five: Heinz should steal the medicine because everyone has a right to live, regardless of what the law says.
- Stage six: Heinz should steal the medicine because human life is a more fundamental value than property rights.
- Stage seven: Heinz should not steal the medicine because sickness is just part of the natural life-and-death cycle. They should just enjoy the time they have left together ("Kohlberg's Stages," 2004).

According to Kohlberg, what defines a person's moral reasoning stage is not the specific moral choice, but the reasoning used to justify that choice (Bee, 1995).

Educating for Character, Thomas Lickona

Sharon's dilemma: Sharon and Jill were best friends. One day they went shopping together. Jill tried on a sweater and then, to Sharon's surprise, walked out of the store wearing the sweater under her coat. A moment later, the store's security officer stopped Sharon and demanded that she tell him the name of the girl who had walked out. He told the storeowner he'd seen the two girls together and was sure the one who left had been shoplifting. The

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storeowner said to Sharon, "Come on now, come clean. You could get into serious trouble if you don't give us your friend's name." Should Sharon give Jill's name to the storeowner? Why or why not?