

The Good Teen

Rescuing
Adolescence
from the
Myths of the
Storm and
Stress Years

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With Roberta Israeloff



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Character

Our character is what we do when we think
no one is looking.

—H. Jackson Brown Jr., author of
Life's Little Instruction Book

As an eighth grader, our older son Justin was appointed student manager of the middle school's girls' volleyball team. During one of the games, two kids sitting in the bleachers began throwing candy from the stands onto the court. Justin asked them to stop.

When they refused, Justin consulted a coach, and the boys were escorted out of the gym. After the game, as Justin was leaving the building, the boys confronted him. One held him as the other shoved him to the ground and began to punch him. Soon blood was flowing from Justin's nose and the back of his head where his skull had hit the floor. Frightened, the boys ran off.

By the time I arrived at school—I'll never forget how I felt

following the trail of Justin's blood—police officers were talking to him. They asked him to identify his attackers, which he did, and if he wanted to press charges, which he didn't. "If you don't press charges, I will," I told him, and he acquiesced.

Later that evening an officer came to our home to tell us some unwelcome news. It seems that as Justin's attackers were forcing him to the ground, he grabbed one boy's shirt, which then ripped. If we pressed charges against the boy who had beaten him, the police officer reluctantly told us, that boy's father would press charges against Justin for vandalism, malicious mischief, and assault—all because of the ripped shirt. He also explained that if Justin was charged, he'd be treated in the same way as his attacker until the matter was fully adjudicated.

Justin, his face swollen and painful, was stunned. "What should I do?" he asked my wife, Jackie, and me.

My son was facing a moral dilemma. He had to make a difficult choice, one where neither option was desirable: if he went ahead with his suit, he would himself be charged with a crime. If he dropped it, he'd allow his attackers to walk away from their attack without consequence. There was no one clear answer, one that would address all of his concerns.

Unfortunately, teens face decisions like this all the time. As I emphasized earlier, part of growing up is moving from a black-and-white world to one that is dominated by shades of gray. For many adolescents, every aspect of their lives—their relationships within the family, with friends, at school, at work, and in the world at large—seems riddled with increasingly complicated and difficult choices. Sometimes they have to choose between the lesser of two evils; sometimes they feel as if they have no choice at all. Navigating their way through complex situations is how teens develop character.

DEFINING CHARACTER

Character is easy to recognize but resists succinct definition. It's not simply about how we feel and think but also about how we act. It

derives from our belief in the social contract—the implicit agreement between citizens and society. When we behave in ways that support society and its institutions, society in turn supports and protects us. Actions are moral if they reinforce this reciprocal relationship between the person and a just society. At the same time, we develop character through our interactions with other individuals and institutions.

People who have character understand the importance of respecting the delicate balance between serving oneself and acting selflessly for the good of other individuals or society. They appreciate the importance of investing themselves—in both word and deed—to improve not simply their own lives but the lives of others, the lives of their children, their country, and the world. Importantly, they are able to empathize with those in different circumstances so that they can include in their circle of care those who are less fortunate. In other words, people with character carry out what developmental psychologists Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon call “good works.”

According to my positive development framework, people we recognize as having character usually display three attributes.

- They have a clear sense of right and wrong, a moral compass that guides them in all situations, no matter how murky. They do the right thing, and help others do the right thing.
- This sense of right and wrong is also very consistent and reliable. There are certain lines they won't cross. Others count on them to make the difficult decisions. They show integrity.
- This sense of right and wrong treats everyone with equal consideration. In other words, there's one set of rules: what's right for one person can't be right unless it's equally right for everyone else. For people with character, everyone has an equal opportunity. (I derived this perspective on character from the concept of “distributive justice,” which I will discuss soon.)

None of these three attributes is present at birth. In fact, in the earliest stages of our lives, we follow scripts that lead us in the

opposite direction: babies and toddlers are guided by their own narcissistic needs and desires for immediate gratification, two motivations we need to tame in order to become people of character. We're often guided by anger, as my family nearly was when we learned about the double bind in which Justin was placed—Justin, who'd done nothing wrong yet was being punished twice! Like any other parents, we were furious.

Yet if we'd held on to our anger, we wouldn't have been able to help Justin respond in a moral way. To become a person of character, we need to rely not on our snap judgments or our most inflammatory emotions, but rather on the "moral emotions," which we'll read about soon. Ultimately, we had to experience our anger, acknowledge it, and let it go so that we could move on and help Justin.

By using ideas derived from the Big Three, you can help your child develop character in the face of difficult challenges to his well-being.

BIG THREE #1:

MAINTAIN A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP

- Make sure what you believe and how you act are in alignment.
- Explore conflicts rather than make assumptions.

Aligning Your Beliefs and Actions

A fundamental aspect of character is that it unites moral feelings and action. When we act on our beliefs, when there's no separation between what we feel is right and what we do, we have character. Parents can model such integration of belief and action by behaving in a manner that's true to their word. They can do this by coupling feelings of or statements about unconditional love with behavior that conveys devotion, commitment, and constancy.

For example, Lucie, sixteen, stayed home with a good friend one

weekend when her parents went to visit her older brother at college during Homecoming Weekend. Her parents, Chet and Jamie, were wary of leaving Lucie at home but rationalized that it was only for one night and that they'd be only three hours away. Sure enough, at about three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, in the middle of the college's family picnic, Jamie's cell phone rang. "This is the emergency room," a voice said. "Your daughter, Lucie, just came in; she has some injuries that need immediate attention." Jamie blanched. She learned that Lucie and her friend had gone inline skating, and Lucie had fallen and apparently suffered compound fractures. When Jamie finally reached Lucie on the phone, she promised her daughter that she and Chet would be at her bedside as soon as they could—they were leaving within minutes.

"I was able to stay pretty calm until my parents arrived at the hospital," Lucie reports. "I mean, the emergency room was creepy and I was in pain. But I knew that I could rely on my parents to get to me as fast as they possibly could—I could imagine my dad speeding the entire way—and knowing that they'd soon be with me helped me get through the next few hours."

Exploring Before Making Assumptions

We don't always know when our teens are wrestling with questions of conscience. Sometimes they act in ways that seem strange or suspicious, and we resort to the deficit model to explain their behavior—"She's just being obstinate, like a typical teenager." It's important to find out all the facts you can before drawing conclusions.

For example, during an annual holiday party held by Nick and Ann, their daughter, thirteen-year-old Janet, found herself spending a lot of time with one particular girl. While the other kids huddled in front of video game consoles and watched TV, Janet and Colette hung out in Janet's room.

A month later, Nick, Ann, and Janet were invited to a party at the home of Colette's parents. Janet, however, blurted out, "I'm not going and you can't make me!"

Nick and Ann were flummoxed. It wasn't like Janet to be so obstinate. Normally, she was a compliant girl, eager to please and easygoing. "We can't *not* go," Ann told her daughter. "It would be terribly rude to not accept, especially since Colette's father works for Dad."

"Fine," Janet said—which meant it wasn't fine at all. Nick and Ann threw up their hands. They assumed that Janet had picked this moment to morph into a teenager—that is, she'd become selfish, oppositional, and uncommunicative. But they were wrong.

The next morning, Janet showed up for breakfast visibly upset. "I don't want you to be angry at me," she said to her mother. "It's just that I don't want to spend time with that girl, Colette. I don't like her. She's not a good person."

Ann's antennae went up. "Did something happen when you spent time together during our party?" Had Colette pulled out a pack of cigarettes? Were drugs involved?

"Nothing like that," Janet said. "It's just that . . . she said nasty things about the other kids who were here—that she didn't want to hang out with the black and Asian kids. . . ."

In an instant, Ann realized what had happened. Her daughter was facing a genuine moral crossroads. She didn't want to spend time with a girl who was racist, but she also knew that telling on this girl amounted to squealing. Neither option was satisfactory, and as a result, Janet had simply shut down.

If Janet's parents had used my positive adolescence perspective, if they had rejected the "discontinuity" thesis—that Janet had suddenly changed into a teenager, a person they no longer knew—they could have helped Janet resolve her moral dilemma by saying, when Janet refused to visit Colette, "This isn't like you. Usually you're very friendly. Why don't you want to go?" That way, Janet's parents could have affirmed their ties to their daughter and the strength of their relationship rather than disavowing it. And in this context of trust, it's more likely that Janet would have opened up sooner about what was troubling her.

Maintaining Perspective on Infractions

It's also important not to get too upset about minor incidents in which your teen may not acquit herself with good character. Let's be realistic: even teenagers with an acutely sensitive moral compass do things they come to regret. An honor student who was just accepted to an Ivy League college decides to take her father's car for a joy ride around the neighborhood with a few friends. The president of the student council runs a stop sign and mouths off to the police officer who pulls him over. Stuff happens.

This is not to say that teens shouldn't have to face the consequences of their actions. But it does mean that not every infraction has equal weight—and you don't have to become concerned about your teen embarking on a life of crime after one stupid decision.

If you think the worst of your teen, if you view every minor infraction as evidence of her incompetence or inadequacy, then you may create a self-fulfilling prophecy: your teen will most likely continue to disappoint you. If, however, you view kids as I do, and think the best of them, they'll thrive. Sure, you may be disappointed once in a while when they don't rise to the occasion. But when this happens, they may feel moral emotions such as shame and guilt, which will help them behave differently next time. And the fact that you trust and respect them will help shore up their competence, confidence, connection, and character.

BIG THREE #2:

DEVELOP LIFE SKILLS

- Expect teens to perform chores around the house.
- Model and talk about all the moral emotions.
- Work together to build trust.

Work in the Home

Few things build character like having a job to do. Working, whether around the house or outside the home, teaches teens many valuable

lessons: the importance of being dependable, punctual, responsible, adaptable, and efficient.

But not all jobs are created equal. According to Lawrence Steinberg, psychology professor at Temple University, and Ellen Greenberger, professor of psychology at the University of California, Irvine, when teens toil at boring, repetitive jobs for minimum wage, they end up with a cynical view of work. They come to view work as extrinsically rewarding (as something they do to get money to spend on what they really enjoy), as opposed to realizing that work offers intrinsic rewards—that it can be enjoyed as an end in itself.

Keep this in mind when you and your teen talk about what jobs around the house he can assume. Chores that build character are those that teens understand are important, that are essential to the family's functioning. Rely on the concept of distributive justice to explain why they're getting chores—that what's fair for one person has to be fair for another, and that everyone should shoulder his share, no more and no less.

Remember as well, as discussed in Chapter 3, that job competence doesn't become an area of self-perceived confidence until teens are about fourteen years old. Even so, young teens have the capacity to take on many jobs and chores around the house. Then, as they get older, their roles and responsibilities can increase and become more complex. For example, young teens can:

- Mow the lawn
- Clean their plates after dinner
- Take out the garbage
- Update the family shopping list
- Babysit for younger siblings

"I'll Do It Later"

As many of us know, the reality of getting your teen involved in chores is often complicated. Many households find themselves engaged in unpleasant "chore wars."

"I haven't given my teenagers many jobs around the house," says Louise, "because, frankly, I can't stand to nag them. My younger son said he'd be responsible for putting out the trash twice a week. He thinks this is an important and fair contribution to family life. But he either forgets or he has too much homework, and I end up reminding him from the moment we finish dinner until he goes to bed. I can't stand to hear myself—I sound like a broken record. But if I don't keep at him, the garbage would never go out."

If you find yourself nagging your teens more than you'd like, stop. It doesn't work! Here's a more constructive alternative: give your teen what psychologists call a "limited hold." That is, Louise should say to her son, "The trash has to be collected by nine o'clock tonight because that's when I'll put it out on the street. I'll remind you once after dinner about this. If it's not done by nine, then you won't be able to do something important to you, such as go out after school tomorrow." Then, of course, you have to follow through with this consequence. I'm the first to admit this is easier to do when our kids are seven rather than seventeen, but the strategy is worth a try.

As teens grow, they can look for work in the other two environments in which they live—school and community. But taking a job without understanding the responsibilities involved is like trying to drive a car without fuel: you won't get very far. You need to talk to your kids about the qualities that are important for getting and keeping a job, such as being punctual and presentable; having good hygiene; being respectful, diligent, and reliable. And because very few kids perform flawlessly at their first jobs, teens also need to be coached in how to deal with criticism. They need to practice not being defensive when confronted with their shortcomings, and to learn how to incorporate feedback so they can become more successful. Teens also need to work at getting along with co-workers so that friction doesn't arise.

Mastering the Moral Emotions

Our ability to act with character depends on developing what William Damon, a developmental psychologist at Stanford University, calls

the seven moral emotions, which we call upon when we try to understand and resolve moral issues:

Empathy—the ability to feel another's pain

Sympathy—feeling bad that another person is suffering

Admiration—having positive regard for someone who has acted morally

Self-esteem—feeling good about oneself when one acts morally

Shame—feeling badly for oneself for having done something wrong

Guilt—feeling regret for having done something wrong

Outrage and anger—a strong, negative feeling when one encounters or witnesses social injustices

Some of these emotions are present early in life—empathy, for instance, and shame. Others, including sympathy and admiration, take time to develop.

I advise parents to help their children make moral decisions by asking them to experience these emotions. For example, when Justin seemed unable to reach a decision on how to proceed, I evoked his sense of sympathy by asking him how he thought he'd feel if he were the boy who had attacked him.

I could almost see Justin trying to imagine how it would feel to be brought up in the other boy's family. "I think I'd feel ashamed that my parents didn't know right from wrong," he said. He went on to explain that he felt as if this boy was "disadvantaged" because his family equated a violent assault with a ripped shirt. This realization helped Justin see that he felt sorry for his attacker, a fact that became important as Justin tried to reason out what he should do.

Guilt is also a powerful emotion in the shaping of character. Ken, for example, a tenth grader in a small rural junior high school, was summoned to the principal's office along with three of his techno-savvy friends. Together, they'd discovered a free program on the Web that enabled them to get the passwords to the e-mail and personal

files of every student in the school. The principal accused them of violating the community's trust. He also told them that school-based consequences would be forthcoming; meanwhile, they were to go home and tell their parents what happened.

Not all the boys did—but Ken couldn't keep the news to himself. "The moment he came in the door that afternoon, he told me he had to talk to me," said Noriko, Ken's mother. "He confessed to everything. At first, I was nearly beside myself. How could he do something so stupid! When I told him how upset I was, he first grew defensive: 'No one got hurt,' he said. 'All we did was read people's e-mail. It's not like we sent them spam or anything like that.'

"That's not the point!' I wanted to say to him. But I held my tongue. I could see that he looked miserable, and that the hardest part probably was the fact that he knew he'd disappointed me. So I thought for a minute and then said, 'Remember the day I walked into your room when you were IM-ing a friend, and you thought I read what you had written? Remember how upset you got?' He nodded. So then I said, 'I wonder how you would feel if one of your friends sat down at your computer while you were having a snack and read your e-mail. How do you think you'd react?'

"It was an 'aha' moment for him," Noriko said. "I could see the light dawning in his eyes. He immediately realized how important and basic a right to privacy was." Ken also realized how bad his judgment had been. In a moment, he went from defensively saying, "It's no big deal," to acknowledging that he'd betrayed his friends in a way that would have made him furious if it had happened to him.

At that point, he was ready to accept responsibility and consider how he could make up for his transgression. Ultimately, in a meeting with his mom and the school principal, Ken agreed to stay after school for a month and work in the school's computer lab, helping fellow students solve their computer problems, to make up for his mistake.

Talk About Your Own Moral Dilemmas

Once Ken realized that he'd breached the trust of his classmates and his mother, he was filled with remorse. To help him gain perspective, Noriko confided in her son. She told him that in 1967, when she was a college student, she went to Washington, D.C., to protest the war in Vietnam. A small group of protestors broke off from the main march and ended up at the Pentagon, where they tried to force their way inside. The situation turned violent—protestors linked arms and started forcing their way through the line of U.S. marshals guarding the entrance. Those who made it into the building were then dragged out bodily and arrested. Although Noriko did not enter the building herself, she was there, urging the protestors on.

"At the time it seemed like the right thing to do," Noriko explained to her son, "because I was so adamantly opposed to the war. But I've always regretted going to the Pentagon. Even though I never threw a rock or forced my way in, I felt as if my presence tacitly condoned violence. We thought we were right at the time," she said, "but if I had to do it again, I'd commit myself to non-violence."

Noriko had trouble talking about this, and Ken had trouble accepting that his mother had made a decision that she later came to regret. This gave Noriko the opportunity to talk to her son about the fact that in a democracy we have the right to take unpopular decisions, but at the same time we need to uphold the rights of others with as much conviction as we do our own. She also told Ken that she found a way to live with the regret, and felt that she atoned for her youthful insensitivity by supporting various organizations devoted to good works, such as Doctors Without Borders (medical humanitarian aid) and UNICEF (child welfare). "Ken's at the age when he usually tunes me out," Noriko concluded, "but I could see that he was fascinated to learn that I had made what I considered a grave mistake. And he was comforted to know that he wasn't the only one who had to wrestle with remorse."

Or take this situation I recently heard about: a friend of mine went out to dinner with one of her closest friends from work, a

Korean woman who'd moved here from Seoul when she was in her teens. After a lovely meal, they went to the coat check to retrieve their coats. That's when my friend heard the coat check girl make a racial slur about Koreans. Her friend didn't hear; only she did. In the moment, she felt so upset that she couldn't do or say anything—she just left the restaurant vowing never to go back.

But the incident gnawed at her. The next morning, she called the restaurant, relating the incident to the manager. He said that he'd take care of it, and asked for my friend's number. My friend never expected to hear from him. But a few days later, he phoned to say that he'd fired the coat check girl. My friend had very mixed feelings upon hearing the news. On the one hand, she was glad to know that the girl learned that intolerance won't be tolerated. On the other hand, she felt terribly guilty that she'd caused the girl to lose her job. This eventuality hadn't crossed her mind. What if she had a baby to support? What if losing her job meant she couldn't pay her rent?

I listened to my friend's story and urged her to tell her teenage children what had happened. Our teens need to know that we struggle with moral issues, too. They need us to realize that we don't have all the answers, that the process of growing up is one of learning to distinguish among shades of gray. Because of this, we also need to cultivate humility, not hubris, and help our teens to do the same.

Building Trust Together

Trust is the glue of relationships. All parents want to trust their teens. Yet no matter how well intentioned, teens don't always live up to their word. How should you handle a situation in which your teen is caught in a lie? Can broken trust be repaired?

Joe, sixteen, was invited to a Saturday night party with his girlfriend, Marie. After the party, he told his parents, he wanted to sleep over at his friend Vic's house. Joe's parents knew Vic's parents and had no qualms about the sleepover. When they asked about Marie's plans, Joe said that her brother would pick her up and take her home.

The next morning, Joe came home at eleven o'clock, as agreed. Ten minutes after he walked in, the phone rang. It was Marie's parents wanting to know if Joe knew what time Marie would be getting home because they wanted to go to church. As it turned out, Marie and a group of girls also had slept over at Vic's the previous night.

"Why did you lie to us about Marie sleeping over?" Joe's parents asked him.

"Because I knew you wouldn't let me sleep over at Vic's if you knew the girls would be there, too," Joe said.

"It's possible that we would have said no," his father said, "but we also might have said yes. The problem now is that you've violated our trust in you and I'm not sure how we'll be able to trust you again."

Joe and his family worked out a plan according to which Joe would regain credibility in small steps. That is, the next time he went out, he had to phone his parents—not from a cell phone but from a land-line—so they would know where he was. Slowly and incrementally, he earned back his parents' trust.

BIG THREE #3:

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

- Allow teens to reach moral decisions—and to live with the consequences.
- Encourage teens to take active roles in giving to charity.
- Encourage teens to find models to emulate.
- Let teens make their own decisions—even when you disagree.
- Learn about the power of peer pressure, acknowledge it, and let your child deal with it.
- Help your teen stand up to peer pressure.

Making Moral Decisions

No matter how old your teen is, it's your job not to make a moral decision for your child. Rather, your role is to give him the opportu-

nity to reach a decision on his own. Justin, for example, asked Jackie and me to help him decide whether to press charges against the boy who assaulted him or to let the boy escape with no consequences. We told him that we couldn't decide for him, that the final decision was his. But we'd help him think it through.

First, we encouraged Justin to weigh the pros and cons of each choice. If he pressed charges, the other boy would suffer—but so would he. If he didn't press charges, the other boy would feel as if he got away with his actions, and Justin would suffer alone. In this case, he reasoned, the cost-benefit ratio of pressing charges might not work out in his favor. On the other hand, he knew that everyone in school would know the true story. He guessed that both of the boys who attacked him would suffer at school; if not held legally responsible, they'd be reprimanded, possibly suspended from school, and prohibited from attending any other school sporting events.

He still seemed uncertain, however, about whether to press charges. He'd counted on society's institutions to protect him; he'd been assured that he had access to a legal system that would acknowledge the wrong he suffered and attempt to redress it. When he found out that his attacker had equal access to the legal system, even though the boy's claim wasn't honest, Justin felt as if the system was abandoning him. He recognized that the other family wasn't being honest in their attempt to manipulate the situation. He also knew that his "crime" wasn't intentional and therefore wasn't as grave as the attack against him.

It's often not possible to think your way out of a moral dilemma; you also have to feel your way. That's where the moral emotions come in. When Justin seemed unable to reach a decision on how to proceed, I asked him again to think how he'd feel if he were in the other boy's shoes.

He remembered what he'd discovered earlier—that he felt sorry for the other boy because he'd been brought up in a household that didn't know right from wrong. Having tapped into this well of feelings, Justin ultimately decided not to press charges.

Janet also was aware that she was facing a dilemma: she had to decide what to do about the invitation. As she explained, "When

Colette was at my house, I could walk out on her when she started saying nasty things. But if I'm at her house, I won't be able to do that without appearing rude. If she says something objectionable, though, I'll need to tell her off, and that's rude, too. What do I do?"

Ann, Janet's mother, didn't answer her daughter directly. Instead, she thought of Young Mi, one of Janet's Asian friends. "How do you think you'd feel if you heard Colette saying prejudiced things about Asians when Young Mi was in the room with you?" Ann asked Janet.

"That would be just terrible!" Janet exclaimed. "I'd be so pissed at Colette. And I'd want to protect Young Mi. I guess I'd feel terrible that I even knew someone like Colette."

Here, Janet was drawing on her sense of outrage and anger. During the ensuing discussion, her parents remarked that Janet's attitude reminded them of Rosa Parks, who defied the conventions of her day, insisting that she could sit in the front of the bus even though the segregated society in which she lived demanded that she move to the back. This enabled Janet to tap into her feelings of admiration for someone else who had done the right thing in difficult times, and to acknowledge her own sense of self-esteem—she was willing to risk being perceived as antisocial or ungrateful in order to feel good about herself.

In the end, Janet's parents phoned their friends and said that Janet wouldn't be coming with them.

Justin and Janet were old enough to recognize that they faced a moral dilemma and had to come to a decision. But sometimes teens, especially younger teens, need help framing dilemmas as moral. Suppose, for instance, your thirteen-year-old finds a \$50 bill in the parking lot after getting his hair cut. To him, it's a huge amount of money. Although he's eager to simply pocket the money, something nags at him. He turns to you and asks, "What should I do?"

You can begin by asking him how he thinks the money ended up there. Next, ask, "How would you feel if you were the person who lost it?" Your son will probably be able to acknowledge that he'd feel terribly disappointed.

But your son could also take another tack: "Maybe I'd be so rich that I wouldn't even miss it," your son could respond. You can then

ask, "What if he's your age, and after his haircut, he planned on buying a video game with that money? What if he got the money for his birthday? How would you feel then?"

These questions help your son focus on the reality that his gain is someone else's loss, someone who may be just like him. This establishes the moral framework. By this point in the discussion, your son will probably see that the only honest course of action is to ask if anyone in the barbershop lost some money, or to ask the barber to hold on to the money in case the person comes back to claim it. What began as a stroke of good luck ended as a lesson. With practice, your son will be able not only to recognize these situations in the future but also to act appropriately.

When to Step In and When to Hang Back

As teens grow and encounter more thorny dilemmas, the stakes rise as well. In some cases, you may begin a discussion with your teen intending to let him assume a leadership role only to realize that he may not be mature enough to handle the situation and its consequences.

For example, Tisha had a sterling record after she got her license, but when she turned eighteen she began to accumulate traffic tickets. Not that she told anyone she was being ticketed. On the contrary, her mother didn't know about the tickets until the day she got into Janine's car to move it and discovered a stash in the glove compartment. When she confronted her daughter, Tisha said, "I never got a moving violation. Those are all parking tickets."

"You still have to pay attention to them," her mother said, "or you'll lose your license." But Tisha didn't. And soon she lost her license.

Another family made a different choice. Ray, eighteen, and some of his friends liked to go to a town park on a summer's evening. One night, a police officer approached the group. "It's eleven," he said. "According to that sign posted over there, the park is now officially closed."

"That's funny," Ray said. "It doesn't look closed to me."

For his lip, the officer presented him with a ticket, a fine, and a date to appear in court. Unlike Tisha, Ray told his parents what had happened and said that he wasn't going to appear as summoned. His parents tried to reason with him, but he kept blowing it off. In desperation, they consulted an attorney friend, who told them that if Ray didn't appear as summoned, the violation could become a misdemeanor on his permanent record. Under pressure, Ray agreed to appear at court when scheduled with his parents. But he wasn't done fighting. He insisted that he could wear shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops—until his parents insisted otherwise.

"The moment we set foot in the courtroom," his mother said, "Ray's demeanor changed. It was just a local courthouse, but it had its own severity, and Ray realized that this wasn't something to take lightly. I could see it in the way he stood up and answered questions. He was no longer a sassy, wiseacre kid, but a young man who understood that he had to pay the price for his actions."

In the end, the judge dismissed the charges after hearing Ray's heartfelt apology. On their way home, Ray's parents asked him what he had learned from this incident. "I learned not to joke around with police officers," he said, "and that sometimes I have to swallow things I don't necessarily agree with."

As you can see, the hardest part for parents is knowing when to hang back and let teens suffer the consequences, as Tisha's did, and when to intervene. You have to make a judgment: which consequences can your child cope with and learn from, and which are so unnecessarily harsh that they will overwhelm him? The overarching goal is for teens to learn to monitor and assess:

- The decisions they make
- The process by which they reach these decisions
- The outcome of these decisions

Taking the Lead in the Family Philanthropy

We often think of teens as being on the receiving end of family life. That is, they're often passive—they get invited to parties and

celebrations, they receive gifts, they follow along instead of initiating. But all teenagers are old enough to take a more active role. They can, for example, demonstrate leadership in the area of family philanthropy. If your family donates \$100 a year to charity, ask your teen where she thinks half of this donation should go. If she doesn't know of any worthy charities, ask her how she can learn about some. One family I know sits down together each year just before the December holidays to decide which organizations to support and how to apportion their charitable funds. Each child is asked to prepare a pitch for his or her favorite charity and to be prepared to explain why this particular cause deserves support.

Finding Heroes

Character doesn't develop in a vacuum—we all need people to look up to. In Janet's family, her mother and father referred to Rosa Parks during their discussion with their daughter as a woman who had the strength of her convictions.

There are many people in the public eye today who serve as role models for teens. Think of Bono, or of Angelina Jolie, whose work on behalf of African children has made headlines, or of Bill Gates, who has resigned his position at Microsoft to devote himself full time to his philanthropic foundation.

You can also find heroes close to home—in your own family and circle of friends and neighbors. We all know people who faced daunting challenges—who lost their jobs, suffered through illnesses and bereavements, who were the victims of crimes—and yet survived stronger than ever. Refer to them in conversations with your teen, and encourage your teen to get to know them better. Talking to someone face-to-face is perhaps the strongest prescription of all for developing character.

What you're doing is encouraging the moral emotion of admiration. Seeing how others negotiate adversity and persevere can only inspire us to live up to our ideals.

WHEN YOU AND YOUR TEEN DISAGREE

Character ultimately means acting according to what you think is right, and the reality is that parents and teens don't always agree. In fact, one of the biggest tests of character occurs when a teen takes a position that goes against his parents' beliefs.

Fourteen-year-old Emily thought Mr. Simon was the best teacher she'd had. He made history come alive. One day, Emily went to see Mr. Simon before school began—she had a guidance appointment during his class and wanted to hand in the paper that was due. Mr. Simon thanked her for being so conscientious and told her to put her paper on a pile of papers on his desk. Emily hesitated—as much as she loved him, she knew how disorganized he was, always misplacing papers and running late to class. But she did as she was told and turned to leave.

Mr. Simon followed right behind her, rushing past her down the hall. Emily watched as a paper flew out of the pile he was carrying. Thinking it was her report, she picked it up. To her surprise, she found herself holding a copy of the final exam that she and her classmates would be taking in a few days.

Emily froze. What should she do? She knew that Mr. Simon would never know that he dropped a copy of the exam, and since there was no one else in the corridor at that moment, no one else would ever know that Emily had found it. What if she just stuck it in her backpack? With a high mark on the final, she was sure to get an A for the year.

It would be so easy.

On the other hand, she could catch up with Mr. Simon and give him the paper, explaining that he dropped it. But what if he suspected her of looking at it and memorizing some of the questions? To avoid that unpleasant circumstance, she could simply destroy the page, realizing that Mr. Simon would never know that he had lost it.

In the end, she walked into an empty classroom and ripped the paper to shreds without even looking at it. Then she called her father to tell him what happened. "Why didn't you give it back to the

teacher?" her dad asked. According to his way of thinking, that would have been the most honest decision.

Emily felt flustered. To her, destroying the page was not only honest but also the easiest decision. She wished that her father could have seen the situation from her point of view. I agree: Emily acted with great character. But her father felt otherwise.

In cases like this, families need to talk so that they can understand one another's perspective on the situation. Sometimes there's more than one way to act with character.

Some teens learn all too quickly that making a principled decision doesn't always end well for them. Tito, the father of fourteen-year-old Pedro, established a rule that Pedro had to come home right after school to start his homework. One afternoon after school, Tito called home expecting to reach his son, but Pedro wasn't there. He didn't show up until dinnertime. It turns out that he'd gone to his friend's house. "You know the rule," Tito said. "You're going to have to accept the consequences"—which meant that Pedro was grounded for two days.

Pedro objected, saying, "I know about the rule, but I had a good reason for going over to my friend's house. His father is sick, and my friend didn't want to be alone. He asked me to come."

"You know the rule," Tito said. Pedro insisted that he'd done the right thing—the moral thing. He'd thought things through, and this was his conclusion, based on compassion and sympathy.

But Tito was equally insistent. "You could have called to explain the situation to me," he said. "But you can't just break the rule like that. If you do, there are consequences."

Optimally, what Pedro will take away from this discussion is an understanding that he should have asked his father about breaking the rule before he did it. Because he didn't, he has to accept that he and his father disagree, and he'll have to face the penalty.

Often, conflicts between parents and teens elude easy resolution. Ali, for example, was an exemplary student all through high school. His parents, who had emigrated from Turkey and opened a small restaurant that only minimally supported the family, believed that

having a good education was the key to success. "If I got a 97 on a test," Ali said, "they'd ask me what happened to the other three points. All they cared about was that I get the best grades so I could get a scholarship to a top-notch college."

Ali achieved all these goals, securing a spot at an Ivy League university, where he declared a double major in math and economics. But after a month, Ali found himself disillusioned. "Everyone there was just as smart as I was," he said. "No matter how hard I studied, I didn't stand out the way I did in high school. Here I was at seventeen, having reached the pinnacle of success. Now what? I was feeling burned out."

Ali ended up pledging a fraternity, which his parents considered a huge waste of time. They let Ali know how disappointed they were in him that he was pursuing something so frivolous. But to Ali the fraternity was a lifeline. "I learned to value working with people, not competing against them," Ali says. "I learned to value my people skills, which I'd always put down. I also realized that there was life beyond good grades. We're all going to get good grades and go on to find good jobs. Suddenly it didn't matter if I was valedictorian. I knew I'd get a good job whether my GPA was 4.0 or 3.3. The point is to be personable, to get along with others. My parents would kill me if they heard me say this, but I cheated in high school—everyone does. I didn't outright copy answers or buy term papers, nothing like that. But if I saw that someone had a different answer than I did on a test, I'd rethink what I'd put down. It's cheating, but in a way I could justify. But now I realize I don't want to cheat at all. I guess I just disagree with my parents: grades aren't the be all and end all of life. Life's not a rat race—there's not one winner. I have to act on my own beliefs."

Slipping on the Veil of Ignorance

In this case, Ali was establishing his own set of values, which differed from his parents'. But what if your teen takes a position that goes against *everything* you hold dear? Suppose your daughter decides to

join a protest against a gay/lesbian club that's being formed in her high school. How can you handle this?

Try going back to the moral emotions—to empathy and sympathy, for example. First, ask her to take the perspective of the other person. You could say, “How would you feel if you weren't allowed to form a club at school for people who love ballet?” The goal is to try to get your child to see how it feels to step outside herself.

There's another concept you could use at a juncture like this—the “veil of ignorance.” This concept was developed by philosopher John Rawls, considered one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. In his 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, he espoused a theory of individual rights arguing, among other points, that punishment is just only if we agree that it's just from every perspective, whether we are the one doing the punishing or the one being punished. According to Rawls, we have to consider every moral decision as if we were shrouded in a “veil of ignorance”—as if we couldn't know whether we were the victims or the perpetrators of a misdeed. That is, if we would make the same judgment as to what is right even though we were ignorant about whether the sanctions for bad behavior applied to us or not, then our decisions are just. Only those beliefs that hold up in every case, for every person, are moral.

Suppose your daughter believes in the death penalty for murderers. “What about in cases of self-defense?” you can ask her. She may then argue that self-defense is a special case, at which time you can suggest that she slip on the veil of ignorance and pretend she doesn't know whether she's the person who just murdered someone who was trying to kill her parents, or the judge handing down the sentence. Does she still think the death penalty is always the right punishment?

In the end, you may not be able to change her mind. But you can urge her to articulate her position so that it's based on the “right” reasons. That is, you wouldn't want her to make decisions based on transient feelings such as anger, or on blind prejudice, or because

she feels pressure from her peers. Instead, you want to ensure that she's thoughtfully acting out of deeply felt, legitimate ethical and moral principles. Toward this end, you can talk about how you arrived at the positions you hold dear; perhaps you didn't always believe as you do today. How did your feelings change? What influenced you to change? Maybe at one point you thought differently about homosexuality, but reading and talking to others about the issue caused you to modify your position.

Discussions like this are important not only for moral development but also for positive development in general. Psychologist James Marcia warned of the dangers that occur when teens latch on to an ideology without fully understanding the consequences of that ideology—as in the case of those German youths who ended up embracing Nazism. In Marcia's term, these teens are "foreclosing on their identity"—that is, they are prematurely abandoning the quest for self-definition in order to adopt a prescribed societal role and the matching ideology.

But teens can also foreclose on their identities when they take on roles without believing in their value. A teen who decides very early on that he wants to identify himself as a jock, for example, may find out after enduring a grueling season on the football field or wrestling mat that he's not really as gung-ho or competitive as his teammates—he actually feels bad for his opponent and has trouble delivering the knockout punch. If he clings to this identity without embracing its belief system, he's in effect opting out of the steps needed to adequately define himself. By settling too early, he's depriving himself of an opportunity to grow. Only by grappling with his true feelings and by trying to understand the forces in his life, by trying to think through his decisions and by placing his beliefs and actions in alignment, can he achieve the self-understanding that leads to positive development.

Standing Up to Peer Pressure

The pressure to conform to the crowd bears down on many teens. If there's strength in numbers, then peer pressure can often prove very

powerful. It seems to kick in when teens reach middle school and build throughout high school. As teens' social networks begin to expand, they feel the need to "fit" with one or more groups, fueling the impetus to conform.

There is some good news, however. As mentioned earlier, studies indicate that teens tend to pick friends who share their values and the values of their families. So while peer pressure exerts some influence, it's unlikely to change a basically good kid into a troubled one.

It's also true that teens are aware that they have a private and a public self. While they may feel compelled to go along with the group when they are in school or with others during various activities, they are able to access their more private selves when they need to, and can stand up to injustice when it is necessary. If parents have done their job and have helped their teens understand which lines of behavior cannot be crossed, then it's likely that these teens will be able to stick to their principles. Then the private self can influence how the public self behaves and buck the tide of peer pressure.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PARENTS DON'T INSTILL CHARACTER

If you are remiss or laissez-faire about inculcating character, if you expect others—teachers, authors, religious leaders—to develop your child's moral compass for you, you're taking an extraordinarily big risk. Teens who grow up *not* understanding that they need to be true to themselves and others, or who think it's acceptable to cut ethical corners, often end up with a cynical view of human nature. They care only about results, not about the process. They also earn a name for themselves as people who can't be trusted, and may find themselves pushed to life's margins because they've alienated and harmed the very society they need to protect them. In short, parents who ignore character development place their teen's eventual well-being and adjustment at risk.

LOOKING AHEAD

On the other hand, teens with character become adults who are capable of going beyond the self. That is, they can marshal their energies and emotions in the service of things that are not in their own self-interest. They are committed—behaviorally, emotionally, and morally—to enhancing other people and the world beyond themselves. They care about doing the right thing. Such concern is part of the social contract we make with each other—that we care about those who care about us. We'll explore caring in the next chapter.