LESSON 8

RIGHT VERSUS WRONG: KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE

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"Miss Johnson will now pass out the moral blinders."

RIGHT VERSUS WRONG: KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE

Prework for students: Reading: "Right versus Wrong: Knowing the Difference"

OBJECTIVE

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify right from wrong in at least four different ways and give examples of each.

OPENING

"Sometimes making an ethical decision depends on a person's ability to understand the difference between right and wrong. One definition of wrong is "not in accordance with an established standard," such as our code of ethics. Today we'll consider four more tests for wrong."

STRATEGIES

- Go over the homework assignment.
- Then, follow the preparations and process outlined in the Testing for Right versus Wrong activity.
- Try a right-versus-wrong role play or two to firm up students' understanding. Ask students to incorporate the four tests for wrong into their role plays.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where does "wrong" come from? How does the idea of "wrong" relate to our list of ethical values?
- Why would someone be tempted to do the wrong thing? Can you give some examples?
- Do you think some people might do the wrong thing without even realizing it? Why would this happen?
- If you saw somebody doing something that is clearly wrong, what do you think you would do? Can you give an example?

Closure and Transition

"If one choice in a situation is clearly right and the other clearly wrong, then we will always choose to do right unless, for some reason, we lack the integrity or moral courage to do so. But how do we go about deciding what to do when each of our choices has something that is right about it? Which choice is more right? In the next lesson, we will learn a process for analyzing what may be called 'right-versus-right ethical dilemmas.' "

Homework Assignment

In preparation for Lesson 9, ask students to read "Analyzing Right-versus-Right Dilemmas," found in Lesson 9.

Lesson Assessment: Revisions for Next Time

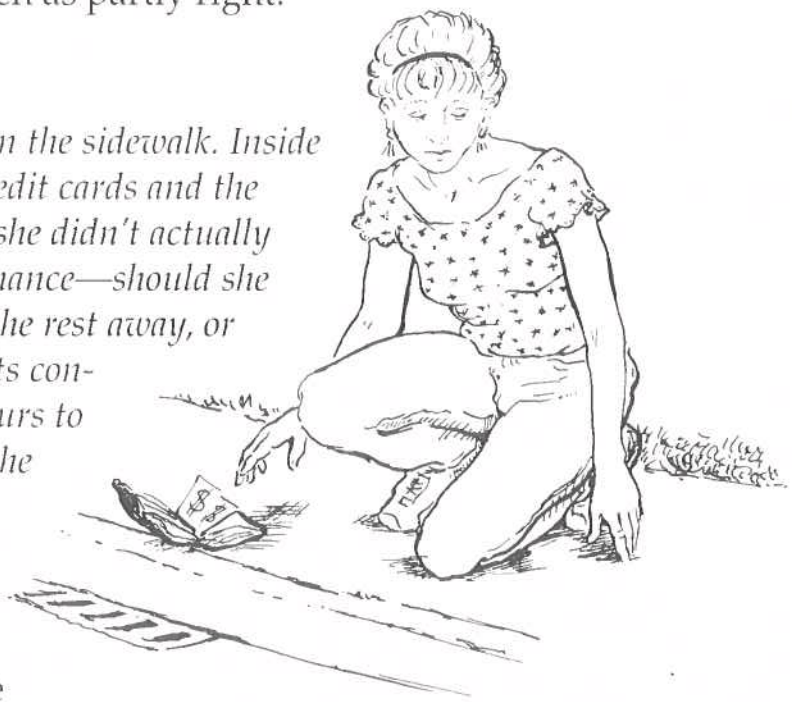
Right versus Wrong: Knowing the Difference

The world, as we know, is full of wrongdoing. Crime, family violence, drug abuse, employee fraud—each of these problems represents a collection of individual acts of wrong. And each individual wrong begins with someone's decision to do something other than right.

But it may not always be clear that a choice is wrong. Sometimes, at first glance, a wrong option may be seen as partly right.

For example:

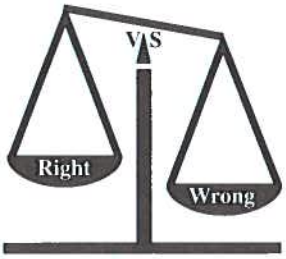
A 12-year-old girl finds a wallet on the sidewalk. Inside there is about $200, along with credit cards and the owner's name and address. Since she didn't actually take the wallet—she found it by chance—should she just pocket the money and throw the rest away, or should she return the wallet and its contents to the rightful owner? It occurs to the girl that she surely could use the money.



In this example, the actor in the story—the 12-year-old girl—sees a choice to be made: Do I keep the money or not?

Four Ways to Tell Right from Wrong

Most of us faced with a choice between the right, the wonderful, and the good on the one hand, and the wrong, the terrible, and the bad on the other, would choose to do the right thing. However, we're sometimes tempted to do wrong, and it often takes moral courage to make the right choice. In the case of the 12-year-old girl, for example, there is probably a reason that tempts her to steal the money.



Sometimes it's helpful to use the process below to determine if a choice would be right or wrong. It involves four tests that act together. While one test by itself may not leave you completely convinced, answering no to most of the following questions will probably leave no doubt in your mind that an action is wrong.

- **The Legal Test:** Is this choice legal? It is wrong, we say, to pass a stopped school bus, take a candy bar without paying the shopkeeper, cut trees on your neighbor's property, or toss an empty soda bottle into the road. More significant, it is wrong to bribe public officials, refuse to pay the rent, pass bad checks, or beat your spouse. These kinds of wrongdoing involve breaking the law. You can break the law by mistake (you may not know a law exists) or on purpose (you may not agree to follow it).
- **The Gut-Feeling Test:** Is this choice consistent with your gut feelings about it? Often our intuition can determine right from wrong before our brains can think it through. Physical reactions, such as gut feelings, often indicate a need for more thought before taking action.
- **The Front-Page Test:** Would you feel good if your choice were on the front page of the local newspaper? In imagining this, you are holding up your choice to be considered by everyone you know. What would your parents think? What would your friends at school think? How would you feel if your teachers read about your decision?
- **The Role-Model Test:** Name a person you respect highly—perhaps a parent, teacher, relative, or local community figure. If this person had to make the decision you are about to make, would she or he make the same decision you are now considering? Sometimes imagining how someone else would decide can help clarify your choices.

Now return to the case of the 12-year-old girl who finds a wallet full of money. Apply the four tests to tell right from wrong. What do you think? Is it *right* or *wrong* for her to keep the money?

Testing for Right versus Wrong

Purpose

- To discuss the meaning of *wrong* and to practice four ways to discern right from wrong

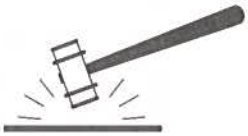
Preparation and Materials

Prepare an overhead of Four Ways to Tell Right from Wrong. Copy, for each student, the worksheets Sneak Preview and For the Taking. Alternatively, create your own right-versus-wrong scenario as a basis for class discussion.

Process

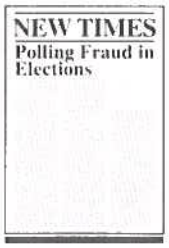
- Divide the class into small groups of four to six students to work through one of the right-versus-wrong examples.
- Ask the students to look closely at each of the four tests for wrong in relation to the story.
- Debrief the exercise as an entire class. In Sneak Preview, for example, how many of the tests indicate that looking at the exam is wrong? Is it easy to see what the right thing to do is? What if some of the tests say it's wrong, but others don't say that it's wrong?
- Next, discuss the reflection questions from the lesson plan with the class.
- Assign the other right-versus-wrong worksheet as homework.

Four Ways to Tell Right from Wrong



The Legal Test

The Gut-Feeling Test



The Front-Page Test

The Role-Model Test

SNEAK PREVIEW

Jim and Carlos were proud to have earned the top grades in their science class and the privilege of staying after school once a week to help Mr. Vasquez in the science lab. Sometimes Mr. Vasquez had them run the experiments he would use as demonstrations in class that week, and sometimes they worked on preparations for his other science classes. This was an opportunity to work with science in a new way, and to explore the field with someone they considered an expert.

One day after school, Mr. Vasquez told Jim and Carlos that they wouldn't have anything very interesting to do. He needed to write the final exam for their class, he explained, and could not be on hand to supervise in the lab. Instead, he put the boys to work washing test tubes and petri dishes and organizing equipment, while he worked on the class exam in his office, next door. At one point during the afternoon, Mr. Vasquez peeked into the lab and said, "I'm going downstairs for a cup of coffee. I'll be back in five minutes."

As Mr. Vasquez disappeared down the hall, Jim whispered to Carlos: "Let's take a look at the exam!" When Carlos hesitated, Jim added, "Aw come on, it's okay to look. We won't see the answers, and anyway, we already know it all!"

Carlos wasn't sure. Was it wrong to look at the exam Mr. Vasquez was preparing?

▶ NOW TRY ALL FOUR TESTS:

*1) Is it "legal" to look at the exam? Explain your answer:*_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2) What do you think Carlos's instincts are telling him? _____

3) If you were Carlos and you took a look at the exam, how would you feel if it were announced on the front page of the newspaper the next day? _____

What do you think the headline might say? _____

4) Name a person you respect and describe what she or he would do in this case: __

FOR THE TAKING

It was Rhonda's and Jody's last day on the job. They had been volunteering at the Sleepy Hollow Nursing Home for about four months, and the time had come to say their good-byes. Even though Jody had been working there for only a short time, she knew she would miss their supervisor, Ms. Smith, and the residents.

As Jody was straightening up the activities room in the afternoon, Rhonda brought up a rather surprising subject.

"What are you taking home with you?" she asked Jody. "I've already got a bunch of stuff in my car!"

Jody hadn't really thought about taking anything home. "Did Ms. Smith say we could take some stuff?" she asked Rhonda.

"Well, it's not the kind of thing you should ask her," Rhonda responded confidently. "Then she would have to say no. But if she comes up short on a few items, it won't be a problem. She probably won't even notice."

Jody felt confused. Was it wrong to take home some of the nursing home's supplies without asking anyone?

▶ NOW TRY ALL FOUR TESTS:

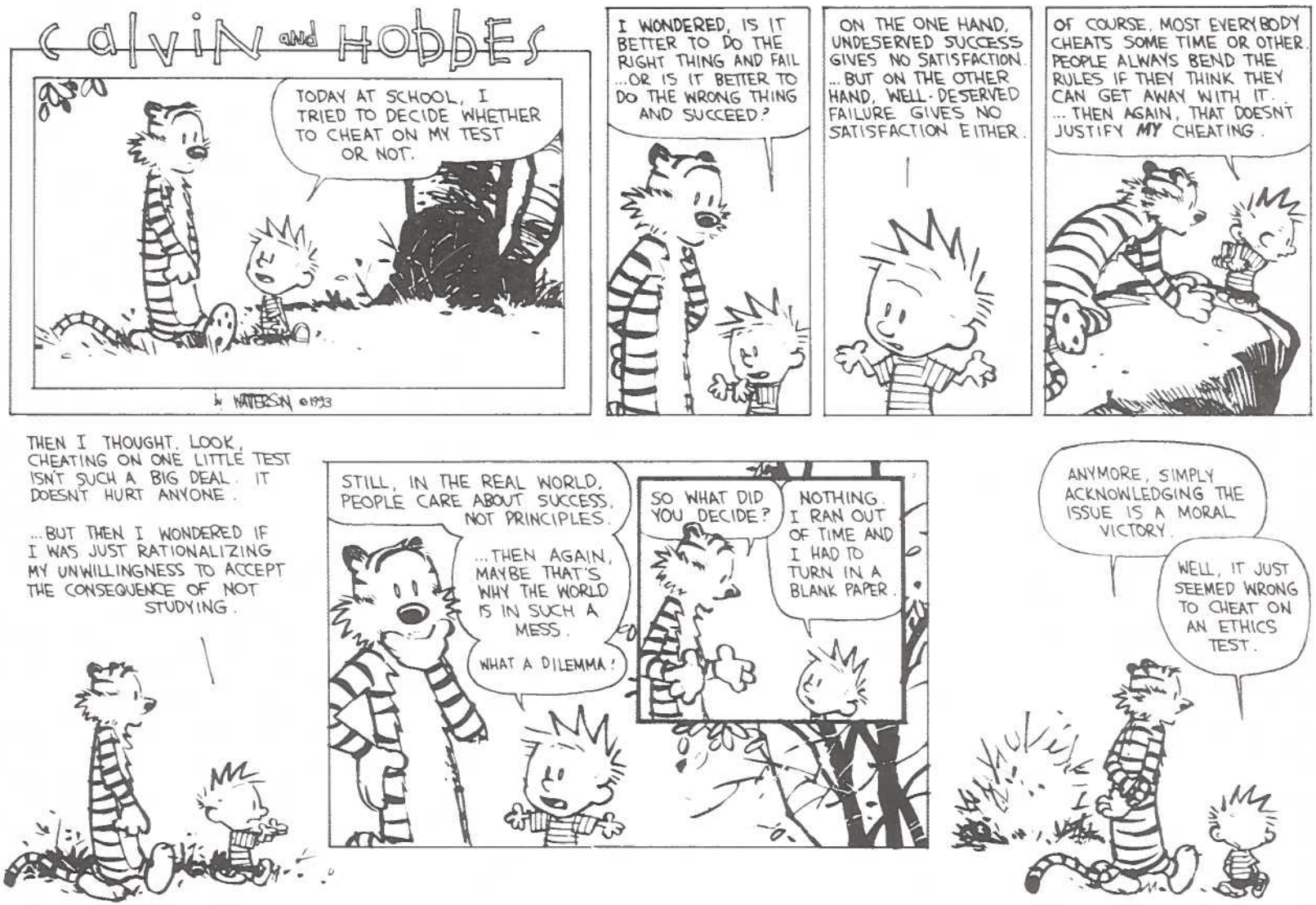
1) Was it legal for Jody to take things home? Explain your answer.

2) If you were Jody, what would your instincts tell you in this case? _____

3) If you were Jody, and you decided to take some things home, how would you feel if it were announced on the front page of the newspaper the next day? _____

And what do you think the headline might say? _____

4) Name a person you respect and describe what she or he would do in this case. __

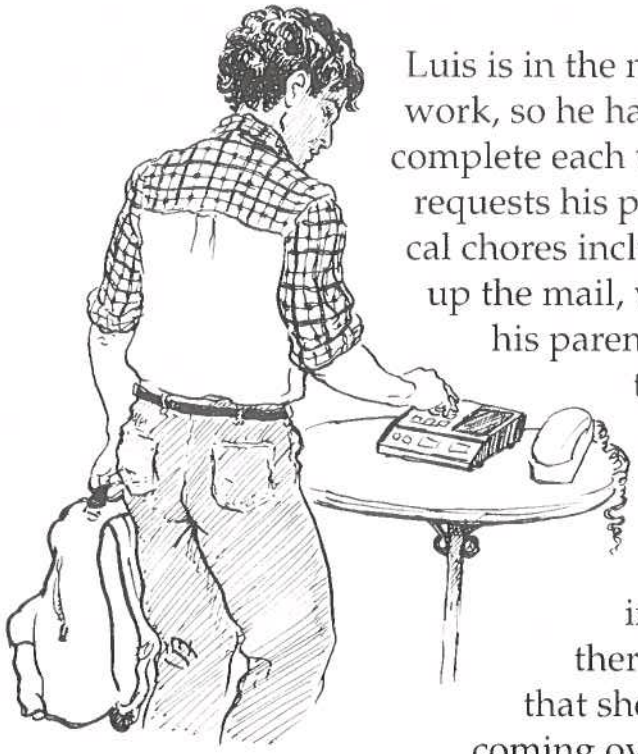


Role Play: Everyone's Doing It

Karina is 13 years old. Her 18-year-old sister, Jasmin, is having a party Saturday night and all of Jasmin's friends—including some who are already out of school—will be attending. Karina figures that if she keeps out of Jasmin's way, she can be at the party, too.

It's Saturday night and the party is well under way. Karina is in the TV room, along with a few of Jasmin's friends, when one of them takes out a couple of beers and begins passing them around. When the beer gets to Karina, she doesn't know what to do. Everyone is looking at her. "Cmon," one of them says, "try it. No big deal." What should Karina do?

ROLE PLAY: IT'S NOT MY JOB



Luis is in the ninth grade. Both of his parents work, so he has several assigned chores he has to complete each week, along with a few extra requests his parents occasionally make. His typical chores include taking out the garbage, picking up the mail, washing the breakfast dishes before his parents get home at night, and walking the dog. Usually Luis is a pretty reliable worker.

One Friday, when Luis gets home after school, he checks the answering machine messages and finds there's one from his mother. She says that she and his father have some friends coming over for dinner and that she needs Luis to vacuum and straighten up the living room and bathroom before he goes out anywhere.

Well, this is not what Luis had in mind for his Friday afternoon. He had planned to go to a friend's house and listen to CDs. Perhaps he could pretend not to have gotten the message. What should Luis do?

Subject Adaptation Suggestions

History and Social Studies

- Has our concept of right and wrong changed over time? Some philosophers refer to a moral perimeter as a boundary that society agrees upon for wrongdoing. In the Middle Ages, for example, forms of torture were accepted as the norm for judicial punishment, while torture in the modern United States is not tolerated. Similarly, polygamy was an unwritten but accepted norm for Southern plantation owners in the 1800s, but is illegal in most states today. How has our moral perimeter shifted in regard to cigarette smoking in recent years? What about with respect to premarital sex? Look for other examples of shifts in our moral perimeter.
- Lead a discussion that asks, "Should unjust laws ever be disobeyed?" Consider that the standard of civil disobedience urges that unjust laws be disobeyed (e.g., Gandhi in India, the civil rights movement in the United States, the Nuremberg trials). But the concept of civil disobedience carries with it a further stipulation: Those who, for moral reasons, disobey the law must do so consciously, openly, and with full willingness to suffer whatever penalties their disobedience brings. Can the students imagine instances in which they might have to choose between obeying the law and civil disobedience?

Language Arts

- In Lesson 6, we operationalized our chosen code of ethics. For each word or concept on the list, we described what types of behaviors would illustrate the concept. Now try doing the Carousel of Values activity (from Lesson 6) for examples of "wrong." For each right value on the list from Lesson 6, try to find a word that describes its opposite, as well as several examples of doing wrong. For example, if "honesty" is one of your ethical values, then "dishonesty" is a word that describes its opposite. Examples of dishonest behavior would include cheating, lying, covering up for yourself or someone else, and acting "fake."

Math and Science

- The exact extent of scientific research misconduct is unknown. But a March 4, 1999 briefing in *Nature* magazine reported that, of 150 investigations the U. S. Office of Research Integrity conducted between 1993 and 1997, fully half resulted in a determination that some misconduct—such as fabricating data, falsifying results, or plagiarism—had occurred. Have students research this topic on the

Web and look for story examples in which a lab scientist doctored results, cheated on experimental protocols, used statistics to deceive others, or was otherwise unethical. Ask students to apply the four tests for right versus wrong to these examples.

Visual Arts

- Create two posters illustrating the four tests for right versus wrong. Imagine your audience is five year olds, in one instance, and fifteen year olds, in the other.