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## The Teenage Mind - part 1

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## **The Teenage Mind**

by David J. Cherrington and J. Owen Cherrington

When we see teenagers do things that are seriously wrong or illegal we often ask, “Why did they do such a stupid thing?” “What in the world were they thinking?” In fact, teenagers do many stupid things and sometimes it appears they were not really thinking. But when we examine what goes through their minds it is easier to understand why they sometimes act dishonestly. We also learn that the excuses teenagers make for being dishonest are not much different than the rationalizations used by adults.

One young man, call him James, was in a video store with a friend who wanted to buy a movie. James did not plan to buy anything and was only there to be with his friend. His friend asked James to hold a video while he looked at other movies. As he stood there, James picked the electronic tag off the video and was observed by the assistant store manager who called the police. Within minutes the police arrived and arrested James for attempted theft. He was taken to the police station, booked for theft, and ordered to appear before the judge in three weeks. Eventually James was ordered to perform 200 hours of public service cleaning parks and roadways.

When we asked James why he tried to steal the video, he denied planning to steal it. He said he had no interest in the video and claimed he would not have accepted it even if they gave it to him. He seemed sincere, so we asked why he picked the electronic sensor off the cover. He said the color of the sensor did not match the other colors on the video cover and he thought it would look better if he took it off. He didn’t know it was an electronic sensor and saw no reason to not remove it. James didn’t think he had done anything wrong and he was shocked when they arrested him and treated him so harshly.

In this case there was no intent to steal and some think James was the victim rather than the perpetrator of a crime – he didn’t take the video, he shouldn’t have been arrested, and he shouldn’t have been required to do public service. Other cases, however, are not this innocent.

Four fifteen-year-old girls were “hanging-out” in a mall. They didn’t plan to buy anything; they just wanted to be together. One of the girls commented on how easy it would be to steal something if she really wanted and her comment initiated a group discussion on creative ways to shoplift. Eventually they resolved as a group that before they left the mall each girl would steal at least \$100 of merchandise. Later they reassembled at the designated place to discuss their exploits and make a solemn vow to never tell anyone. Several months later, three of them individually confessed to their ecclesiastical leader and tried to explain why they had been dishonest. None of them had stolen before; none of them needed the merchandise they stole; and most of them didn’t use it after they had stolen it. All of them knew it was wrong and all of them felt guilty. But at the time it was an exciting challenge that was motivated by a unanimous group decision. None of them was willing to confront the group while they were discussing the “dare” and refuse to go along. Each girl viewed this as a rite of passage and somehow it didn’t seem so wrong at the time since they all agreed to do it. Their only concern at the time was what would happen if their parents learned about it.

A seventeen-year-old young man stole about \$3,000 while he worked for a lumber yard one summer. He knew the correct procedures required him to only give merchandise to customers who had paid for it in the front office and brought a sales receipt into the yard. But customers often came into the yard to see what materials were available and wanted to buy them there. The yard workers would usually sell the merchandise and then take the money to the front office; but on many occasions this young man simply pocketed the money. When he was asked to explain his reasoning two years later while serving time in a correctional facility he said he never thought it was a big deal at the time – he assumed others were also pocketing money, he thought no one really cared, he did not think anyone would notice, and that he thought he deserved to steal since his wages were so low. This young man said honesty had not been part of his life and he would lie and steal whenever it was convenient. Before he was caught he felt no remorse for dishonesty and after he was caught his only remorse was that he got caught.

Most teenagers value honesty and want to behave honestly; but it isn't their highest value. Peer influences are much stronger than principles of honesty and integrity. The following illustrate some of the rationalizations of teenagers that prevent them from behaving honestly:

Expectations of friends. "I have to do whatever my friends expect me to do." Being part of the group and being approved by one's peers is the ultimate driving force in the lives of teenagers.

Everybody's doing it. "Cheating in school is not all that wrong since everyone does it. Therefore, I have to do it too to keep up. Besides, the teachers know about it and they don't say anything so they must approve."

They won't miss it. "Taking things from stores is not a big deal since stores are so big they won't miss this. Besides, they throw away so much wasted merchandise anyway and this would probably just be tossed out."

Staying out of trouble. "I had to lie to stay out of trouble. If I told the truth someone would be disappointed and I didn't want to disappoint them."

No big deal. "It doesn't really matter all that much; so why get all excited about it? It's no big deal. Who cares anyway? Like they say in sports: No harm, no foul."

Just a game. "There's nothing to get excited about here; this is just a game. If you get caught you have to give it back. But it's nothing to feel bad about."

These rationalizations highlight the importance of teaching honesty to students and new employees. Most teenagers are at a stage of moral reasoning where right and wrong are primarily determined by their peer group standards. Honesty and integrity, however, tend to be higher-level behaviors that are based on principles of right and wrong. It is not impossible for teenagers to understand and value honesty. Indeed many grade school children have internalized honesty to a considerable extent because of parental instruction and the influence of other significant role models. But teenagers need to know that honesty is a highly valued attribute of character and something that matters in society.

A human resource manager tells the following story about his interview with a teenager who applied for a job that involved operating a cash register. The interviewer was trying to assess the teenager's honesty.

I asked one teenager if he was totally honest with his parents and his answer was “Pretty much.” I asked what that meant, and he said it meant that he told the truth about nineteen out of twenty times. I asked him if he could consider himself an honest person if he only lied once in every twenty times and he said yes. I asked if I could trust him if I knew that he would tell me the truth nineteen out of twenty times and only lie once. He said yes; but I could see he was a little hesitant. Then I asked him how I would know when the one time was. After a long pause, he said I wouldn’t know. Then he agreed that even if he only lied once in a hundred times his parents still couldn’t really trust him. We had a long discussion and I was sufficiently convinced about his sincerity and insight that I decided to give him the job.