



# 8th Grade

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## Stories to Supplement Lessons

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## Sample questions

Below are general questions that can be used with the stories.

- What did this story teach us?
- What did this story mean to you?
- What pillar could be tied to this story?
- After hearing this story, is there anything you may do differently from now on?
- Can you relate to the story? In what way?
- Will this story cause you to change your current way of thinking?

Some other thought provoking questions that may apply to the stories are listed below.

- What can happen when we can't control our anger? To other people? To ourselves? How can it affect our life? Our relationships?
- Have you ever been rewarded for a kindness? What did you do?
- Have you ever thanked someone for something kind they did for you?
- Would you help out someone in need? Why? Why not?
- What do you think it means to be a "good person"?
- Was there a time when you made a choice to "do the right thing" instead of something you knew was wrong?
- Describe someone you know who is about getting. Describe someone you know who is about giving. How are they different?
- What can we do to shape our own character/destiny?

## You Don't Have to Be Sick To Get Better

As a full-time ethicist – can you believe there even is such a thing? – I spend lots of time talking about right and wrong with parents and politicians, kids and corporate managers, journalists and generals.

One thing I have learned is that while most people have a high self-image when it comes to ethics, being a good person and doing the right thing are easier said than done. For one thing, it's not always easy knowing what's right. If I was supposed to have learned everything I needed to know about ethics in kindergarten, I must have been absent that day. Second, having the moral willpower to put ethical principles above self-interest and always do the right thing takes a lot of character, especially when no one else seems to be living up to such high standards.

The fact is that for most of us, trying to live a good life engages us in a constant struggle between what we want to do (our desires) and what we should do (our ethical duties). Even basically good people may lie occasionally, cheat just a little and rationalize away moral compromises. It's human nature. No one is perfect.

But it's also human nature to strive for perfection and to care about our character. When it comes to ethics, you don't have to be sick to get better. And getting better is important if we want to improve the quality of our lives and set the example we should for our children.

## The Golden Rule

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The Golden Rule is an ethical principle rooted in every major culture. You can find it in the writings of Confucius and Aristotle as well as in the scriptures of virtually all religions. You don't want to be lied to, yelled at or treated unfairly, so don't lie to, yell at or be unfair to others.

It's a terrific rule to create a more kind and just society, and it is central to the ethical principle of respect. But if we're not careful, we can twist the meaning of the Golden Rule by treating it as a rule of exchange rather than a rule of ethics. In other words, we are honest, kind or fair to others only so they will be honest, kind and fair to us.

There is, of course, a practical aspect to the Golden Rule. Kindness often begets kindness, and people are more likely to be honest with us if we're honest with them. The trouble is that if we anchor our willingness to treat others well in expectation that they will return the favor, what is our moral duty with respect to selfish, disrespectful and dishonest people? Can we modify the rule to “Do unto others as they have done unto us,” or “before they do it to us?”

Is it ethical to lie to a liar or cheat a cheater? Not for a person of character.

We may feel like suckers from time to time if we're honest and kind to everyone, but in the end the best reason to follow the Golden Rule is not because it assures us that others will treat us right, but because it is right. You see, how we treat others is not simply about them. It's about us. It defines who we are.

## Being Basically Honest

After a workshop, a fellow said, “I don’t always play by the rules or tell the truth and some of the things you said made me a little uncomfortable. But I realized I’m ‘basically’ honest. Isn’t that enough?” I don’t think so.

What does it really mean when someone declares that they’re “basically honest”? I think it means that they are willing to be honest unless it costs too much. They’re willing to be honest as long as they get what they want. In the end, I think it means “being honest enough.” It reminds me of a cartoon where one man is talking about another: “I admire honesty, but his insistence on being scrupulously honest is really annoying.”

People who are content being basically honest are admitting that, when the stakes are high enough, they’re willing to be dishonest. Doesn’t that mean they’re basically dishonest?

After all, how many times do you get to lie before you are a liar? How many times does someone get to lie to you before distrust sets in? A former presidential press secretary told a university audience that he believed in always telling the truth to the press. “That way,” he said, “they will believe you when you have to lie.” Honesty isn’t just an illusion created for public relations. The best liars rarely lie. That’s the secret of their success. They may be basically honest, but they’re not trustworthy.

## The Not-So-Useless Old Man

Martin was 90. After a stroke, he moved in with his granddaughter Sarah and her daughter Lisa.

At first, 14-year-old Lisa would try to talk to him but Martin was so ashamed at his inability to speak clearly that he would only respond with grunts and gestures. She wanted to teach him to type notes on a computer, but he wouldn't try.

One evening, Lisa came to his room. She said she wanted to say good-bye, that she was pregnant from a boy who didn't love her, was desperately miserable and that she intended to kill herself that evening. He tried to say NO! NO! But she just kissed him on the cheek and went to her room.

Martin went to the computer and struggled to type a note, letter by letter.

When he finished he pushed over a TV in his room to attract Lisa's attention and he fell hard in the process. Lisa came running and called an ambulance. After it took Martin to the hospital she noticed something on the computer screen. There were lots of typos but this is what he wrote: "I do not speak because I cannot talk, not because I cannot think or feel. I feel helpless and used up and ashamed to be so useless. I gave up living and now you are giving up too. But your life is not hopeless. Maybe I'm not useless. You are smart and tender and loving. Your face is pretty, but your soul is beautiful. You are a wonderful gift to the world. Do not waste it because you are impatient that you have not yet found someone to appreciate you. It will happen. You must live so you can love and if you love you will live." He died that night. Lisa didn't.

You Don't Have to Be Sick to Get Better by Michael Josephson  
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## A Tribute to Lincoln

Ok, I'm an Abraham Lincoln groupie. He is by every measure my biggest hero. My daughter Abrielle was named after him and our dog is named Lincoln.

By sheer good fortune, my son Justin was born on Lincoln's birthday. I often visit the Lincoln Memorial and stand in awe of his magnificent eloquence and his legacy of honor, courage, compassion, humility and humor.

Yet in his own time he was more often ridiculed than revered. He was unmercifully belittled in the papers that often called him unrefined, simple, a bumpkin. He was ungainly, to some downright ugly.

But what a man! Self-educated, self-made, he was a skillful lawyer and effective politician whose character made his name almost synonymous with integrity. He was an inspirational leader who really believed in democracy – a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Empathy and compassion were in his blood. He felt the pain of others as deeply as any man could, yet duty made him a leader of our nation's bloodiest war.

Now one of the most esteemed men in all history, Lincoln was often depressed by feelings of inadequacy. Groucho Marx once joked, "I wouldn't want to be in any club that would have me." But the original source for this classic line was none other than a young, self-effacing Abraham Lincoln who quite seriously wrote to a woman who rejected his marriage proposal: "I can never be satisfied with anyone who would be blockhead enough to have me." It's interesting, in a world that places such a high value on self-esteem, that one of America's truest and greatest heroes was genuinely, perhaps excessively, humble.

## We Shape Our Own Character

There's no doubt that our character has a profound effect on our future.

What we must remember, however, is not merely how powerful character is in influencing our destiny, but how powerful we are in shaping our own character and, therefore, our own destiny. Character may determine our fate, but character is not determined by fate.

It's a common mistake to think of character as something that is fully formed and fixed very early in life. It calls to mind old maxims like "A leopard can't change its spots" and "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." This "etched in stone" perspective is supported by a great deal of modern psychology emphasizing self-acceptance. Like Popeye says, "I am what I am." The message is: "I'm done. Don't expect me to be more, better or different."

These views of character totally undervalue the lifelong potential for growth that comes with the power of reflection and choice. How depressing it would be to believe that we really couldn't get better, that with dedication and effort, we couldn't become more honest, respectful, responsible or caring.

There are so many things in life we can't control—whether we're beautiful or smart, whether we had good parents or bad, whether we grew up with affirmation or negation or with affluence or poverty. And though these circumstances of our lives surely influence our values and experiences, they do not control them. People of good and bad character come from all sorts of circumstances.

It's uplifting to remember that nothing but moral willpower is needed to make us better. No, it isn't easy. But if we strive to become more aware of the habits of heart and mind that drive our conduct, we can begin to place new emphasis on our higher values and become what we want our children to think we are.

## The Golden Rule as the Road to Honor

Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, Confucius was asked, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?” He answered, “Reciprocity. What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” This basic principle, now called the Golden Rule, can be found in every major religion and philosophy.

Many people evoke one version or another of this rule, but it’s often misused. You see, the Golden Rule is not primarily a rule of enlightened self-interest. Sure, people are more likely to be nice to you if you’re nice to them, but the moral center of this principle is lost if you simply view it as a rule of exchange: do unto others so they will do unto you. Or: do unto others as they have done unto you. Let alone: do unto other before they do unto you.

The core of the Golden Rule is a moral obligation to treat others ethically for their sake, not ours, even if it’s better than the way they treat us. So we should be honest to liars, fair to the unjust and kind to people who are cruel. Why? Not because it’s advantageous, but because it’s right. And because the way I treat others is about who I am, not who they are. It’s like the man who broke off an argument that descended to name-calling, saying, “Sir, I will treat you as a gentleman, not because you are one, but because I am one.”

Sure, if we commit to always treating others the way we want to be treated, we’ll be taken advantage of occasionally. But that’s also true of those who are always trying to outsmart their neighbors.

## Happiness Is a Choice

In a “Peanuts” cartoon, Lucy asks Charlie Brown, “Why do you think we were put on earth?” Charlie answers, “To make others happy.”

“I don’t think I’m making anyone happy,” Lucy replies, “but nobody’s making me very happy either. Somebody’s not doing his job!”

Charlie talked about life in terms of giving while Lucy talked about life in terms of getting. I know a lot of people like Lucy. Preoccupied with getting and having, they are so aware of what they don’t have that they never enjoy what they do. They live in an “if only” world, always one step away from happiness. “If only I could get this raise, make this sale, pay off my debts, win this game, I’d be happy.”

Dennis Prager, in his book *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*, argues that human nature itself impedes our ability to be happy. He claims that children learn to demand “more” as soon as they begin to communicate, and that the desire for more can never be satisfied because the more we have the more we want.

Abraham Lincoln, who was prone toward depression, said, “A person is generally about as happy as he’s willing to be.” He understood that happiness is a way of looking at your life. It’s about choosing good feelings over bad, positive attitudes over negative ones and gratitude over greed. Thus, people who are poor, ugly and in ill health can be considerably happier than people who are rich, beautiful and healthy – because they choose to be.

Happiness is not getting what we want; it’s learning to want what we get.

## The Essence of Sportsmanship

In 1964, an Italian named Eugenio Monti was the world champion in bobsledding and a strong favorite in the Winter Olympics. His nation expected a gold medal and after his last run it looked as if he might get it. The British team, led by Tony Nash, still had a chance to beat him, but Nash discovered a faulty axle that would require his team to withdraw. Instead, Monti removed a critical bolt from his sled and offered it to Nash. As if to prove that no good deed goes unpunished, Nash won the gold medal and Monti was viciously criticized in the Italian press. Yet he was unshaken. "Nash didn't win because I gave him the bolt," he reportedly said. "He won because he had the fastest run."

Every real competitor wants to win, but Olympic medalist John Naber says a true sportsman, one who believes in the Olympic ideal, wants to win against his best opponent on his best day. The sportsman is not elated but disappointed when top competitors are injured or disqualified.

Monti won the gold medal at the next winter Olympics, but it was his willingness to lose that earned him a prominent place in Olympic history. His act represents sportsmanship at its best: the pursuit of victory with zeal and passion, recognizing that there is no true victory without honor.

Today, with so many athletes willing to cheat or behave badly just to win, we need reminders of the noble potential of sports. And parents and coaches should be teaching youngsters that the real glory is in the striving, not the winning.