Character and Leadership Packet #1

Accepting Responsibility

Introduction

There are many ways you can make your life better. For example, you can keep your teeth healthy by brushing, flossing and getting check-ups. Exercising and eating right can help keep your body healthy. You can even improve you mind if you’re willing to study and learn more. Studying can improve your grades too. And being polite to your classmates can make it easier to get along with them. These are just a few examples of how you can help yourself.

There are also steps you can take to make school life better, not only for you but also for everyone. To accept responsibility for your actions is one of these steps. When you take responsibility for your actions you own up to your mistakes. You admit them and try to do better the next time. This approach makes school a better experience for you and everyone. After all, honesty is the best policy.

On the other hand denying what you did or blaming others for your mistake is not a good approach. Every student probably knows someone who lied to stay out of trouble. If the lie worked it only encouraged more bad decisions. It is always best to be honest with yourself and with others. Everyone appreciates fair treatment.

Have you ever been involved in a group project where one student let the rest of the group do all the work and then got the benefit from the efforts of others? This student took advantage of the other team members. It isn’t fair for someone to stand around and listen to an iPod while the others get the work done.
What might this student say to the others in the group? Saying something like, “I didn’t carry my load on this project, and I apologize,” might ease tensions a bit.

Mature students know they will make mistakes but they also know they must accept responsibility for them. This includes admitting the mistake and if possible fixing what went wrong. They know that by being honest about their mistake something good may come from it. If nothing else it is a learning experience.

Some great discoveries have come from mistakes. In 1859, the Scottish author, Samuel Smiles wrote, “We often discover what we will do, by finding out what we will not do; and probably he who never made a mistake never made a discovery.”

The German physicist, Wilhelm Rontgen won the first Nobel Prize for his accidental discovery of what he called the “X-ray,” which physicians worldwide soon adopted as a valuable medical tool. Then there was Christopher Columbus who accidentally discovered America in his search of a route to Asia. He examined the mostly southward voyages of the Portuguese into the Atlantic and Africa and thought that he could also sail westward and ultimately reach India.

We all make mistakes. Some mistakes are serious. Others are just disappointments. No matter the type of mistake it’s how we react that matters.

Leaders look inside themselves when something goes wrong and are willing to accept constructive criticism to get back on track. They want to right their wrong, they don’t look for ways to excuse what they have or have not done.

Accepting Responsibility When We Go to Work

While you are in school it’s good to learn the importance of accepting responsibility. In the world of work when things go wrong you will be expected to own-up to your mistakes and correct them. This may be embarrassing at times and hurt your pride but it is the right thing to do.

Imagine working at a bank as a teller and not having your drawer balance at the end of the day. It is up to the teller to find the error. Maybe he gave a customer too little money when a check was cashed. The teller will need to tell his supervisor and contact the customer with an apology. No excuses will be accepted.

The bagger at the grocery store who discovers he left apples on the counter instead of putting them in the customer’s bag needs to take quick action. He may need to run to the parking lot before the customer unloads his cart and leaves. If he catches up with his customer he might offer an apology and offer to unload the rest of the cart.

Have you ever had a waiter take down the wrong order and then bring you something you didn’t
want? You order a chicken sandwich but end up with turkey instead. A good waiter will apology for the mistake and rush to get you what you wanted.

Teachers have to accept responsibility for mistakes too. The teacher who in haste marks an answer wrong that is correct knows an apology is in order and a change of grade might be necessary. Teachers want students to get credit for their efforts and are willing to correct their own mistakes.

Now let’s take each of the above people, the teller, bagger, waiter and teacher and change their approach to handling the problem. What if the teller would have blamed his mistake on his supervisor? The bagger could have just ignored the problem and put the apples back in the bin. The waiter could have said, “No this is what you ordered!” The teacher could have just made the correction without an apology.

It’s how a person treats a mistake that is often more important than the error itself. Everyone makes mistakes but not everyone owns up to it. How you handle your mistakes says a lot about your values and character.

**Two Short Stories**

*Not So Famous Fay*

Fay was creative. As a child she would make up skits and perform them for her family. As she got a little older she would include neighborhood kids in her skits and sell tickets to their parents. Parents didn’t mind the small cost of admission to see their children perform.

Many young kids get their first start with capitalism by opening up a lemonade stand. Not Fay, she was making thirty dollars a week by the age of eight just by holding weekend mini-plays. She could always count on parents and grandparents wanting a seat and paying a small admissions charge.

Not only was she a good business manager but a budding young actress as well. By age 12 she was involved in community theatre and before long she was in professional plays around the Chicago area. She was making more money and becoming more famous.

By the time Fay was fourteen years old she had money in a savings account for college and plenty of cash to spend on herself. She loved to spend money on clothes and the latest technology. By the time she was in junior high school she only wore designer clothes and carried all the latest Apple products.

Fay developed an inflated opinion of herself. The bigger her ego grew the fewer friends she seemed to have. Fay had requirements for her few selected friends. They too had to have the best clothes and carry the latest technology. Fay was considered a snob by most of her class-
Fay would only sit with her friends Amanda and Ava on the school bus. Seats on the bus weren’t assigned but everyone knew whom Fay would be sitting with everyday.

There was one bus rule announced by Mr. Keller at the beginning of the year that he doesn’t let any one forget. “No eating or drinking on the bus.” Mr. Keller insists on a clean bus.

Some how or another Fay never thought the rule applied to her. She loved M&Ms and would pop them in her mouth to and from school. “Neat and clean, no problem,” she would say. Out of her coat pocket and right into her mouth. Amanda and Ava could always count on Fay sharing a few with them.

Fay eventually got tired of the M&Ms and decided it was time for a change. Her pockets were now full of pistachios. A little green nut enclosed in a thin shell. Fay had heard they were good for your complexion. “Hey Amanda, hey Ava, want a healthy treat today?”

“Sure, they said.” “What is it?”

“We’re going to have some salty and crunchy pistachios, you’ll love them and they’re good for you,” Fay said.

“But what will we do with the shells?” said Amanda.

“We’ll just throw them under the seat in front of us and blame Jackie and her friends on the mess if we’re asked about it.” “I’m tired of the dirty looks I’ve been getting from Jackie anyway,” said Fay.

“Remember, there are no assigned seats so Mr. Keller doesn’t really know where people have sat on any given day,” said Fay.

“Right, and Mr. Keller will blame them because he already had to tell them about keeping their muddy feet off the back of the seat in front of them,” said Ava.

The very next morning, Jackie and her friends were in the principal’s office denying they had anything to do with the mess on the bus. “Honestly, Mr. Anderson, we respect Mr. Keller and understand the rule. We never bring anything to eat or drink on the bus,” Jackie said. They suggested he talk with Fay, Ava and Amanda because they were in the seat behind them.

Later in the morning, Fay, Amanda and Ava told Mr. Anderson that they had seen Jackie and her friends with a bag of nuts on the bus. Mr. Anderson decided to do some locker checks. A bag of pistachios was found on the top shelf of Fay’s locker. When confronted, Fay said she had nothing to do with it, that it was Amanda who put the bag of nuts in her locker. And that it was
Amanda and Ava that made the mess on the bus.

**Byron the Bone Crusher**

Byron was considered an average student by most standards. His grades were a mix of Bs and Cs, with the occasional “A”. He enjoyed playing sports, especially football, but he was not the most coordinated. In fact, he often tripped over his own feet. He blamed it on the size 13 shoes he wore.

He earned the nickname, “Bone Crusher” in sixth grade because he stumbled and fell as he reached for a cookie in the cafeteria’s food line. He landed on two students in front of him, instantly pinning them to the ground. It wasn’t his shoe size that earned him his nickname; it was more about his body size. Byron weighs over 200 pounds. His mom has had him on several diets but none seemed to work. Byron just loves to eat. Unfortunately his two favorite foods are pizza and French fries. Not your typical low calorie foods.

In spite of being over weight and a bit on the clumsy side, Byron would go out of his way to help someone in need. When someone forgot a pencil Byron was always the first to say, “Here, take this one, I have some extras.” If a teacher struggled to open a door because her hands were full of books it would be Byron who ran to help. Byron’s physical education teacher could always count on him to help put away the equipment at the end of a period.

He was always anxious to help, sometimes too anxious. That’s why he had a hard time turning down the request by Tyrone. Tyrone asked Byron not to put away all of the bats when P.E. class was over the last period of the day.

“Hey ‘Bone Crusher,’ don’t be putting the bat I use away at the end of the period. You can put all the other bats in the bat bag but not the Louisville Slugger Metal Bat. I’m going to borrow it for the weekend game; I hit best with this bat. You would like to see us win, right? Don’t worry I’ll let Mr. Johnson know that I’m borrowing it.” Byron listened and just nodded his head in agreement. He picked up the rest of the bats, bagged them and took them into the gym where he placed them in the equipment room.

Byron started to think about what he had just done. He second guessed his decision but then rationalized it by saying to himself, “I’m sure that Tyrone will be talking with Mr. Johnson about this and Mr. Johnson will want Tyrone to do well in his game this week-end.

On Monday, first period, Mr. Johnson counted the number of bats and balls just like he does every Monday morning. “Nope, that’s not right, only 12 bats, we’re missing one, I’ll count them again,” he said to himself. And he did but still only 12 bats. “Maybe Byron left one on the field from last period of Friday, I’ll go see.” Finding none he decided to call Byron to his office.

Byron, we’re missing one bat from your P.E. class last Friday. Did you know what happened to
it? It was the Louisville Slugger Metal Bat.” Byron’s face turned red. Mr. Johnson could see that he was embarrassed. “Well Byron, have you seen the bat?”

“I knew I made a mistake when I told Tyrone I would leave the bat on the field for him,” Byron said.

“But why would you leave it for Tyrone?” said Mr. Johnson.

“He said he needed it for a game this past weekend,” Byron said as he choked back tears. “He told me that he was going to let you know that he needed the bat, but I knew he was probably not telling me the truth. This is all my fault and I am sorry Mr. Johnson,” said Byron.

“That’s right Byron you are at fault and so is Tyrone. He’s really more at fault than you but you will both serve three detentions for what happened.” Byron served his detentions and wrote Mr. Johnson a letter of apology.

Tyrone, however, cut his detentions and never apologized to Mr. Johnson. He also had to be reminded to bring the bat back to school. He is no longer playing for the baseball team and has now been suspended for two days.

The Importance of Accepting Responsibility

When you accept responsibility for your actions you are doing what is right. You are being fair to yourself and to others. To deny that you have made a mistake or attempt to cover it up only plays into your own insecurities and causes others to respect you less. After all who wants to gamble with their reputation?

Who would you have greater respect for, a person who takes responsibility for his/her actions, and promises to do better in the future, or someone who denies any involvement in something when it’s obvious they were the cause of the problem?

Students who own up to mistakes gain respect and build trust. These qualities are important in all aspects of a person’s life. No relationship lasts without trust and respect. Think about the qualities you most admire in people. Would trust and respect be at the top of the list?

Just as important as it is to be responsible for your actions it is also important to respect others for taking responsibility. Everyone needs to realize that to error is normal and to make another person feel badly about a mistake is wrong. How you react to mistakes made by others can either be helpful or harmful. Do you make others feel guilty for mistakes or show acceptance when they admit being wrong?
Learning How to Accept Responsibility

Stop and think back to the last time you accepted responsibility for something. Does it seem as if you had a difficult time doing it? If you did here are some tips.

- Recognize that you cannot place the blame on others for the choices you make.
- Don’t deny that you made a mistake.
- Understand that it’s normal to make mistakes. Everyone does. It’s how you handle them that matters.
- Be honest about your mistake. Tell the truth about what happened.
- When an apology is in order say, “I’m sorry.”
- If something can be done to fix the mistake, do it.
- Try not to repeat a mistake.

Famous Quotes

“The willingness to accept responsibility for one’s own life is the source from which self-respect springs.”-- Joan Didion

“When you blame others, you give up your power to change.”-- Author Unknown

“Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him, and to let him know that you trust him.”-- Booker T. Washington

“When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at himself.”-- Louis Nizer

“You must take personal responsibility. You cannot change the circumstances, the seasons, or the wind, but you can change yourself.”-- Jim Rohn

“All blame is a waste of time. No matter how much fault you find with another, and regardless of how much you blame him, it will not change you.”-- Wayne Dyer
Accepting Responsibility
Questions for Individual Students

Name___________________________       Date____________________

These questions are based on the packet you have just read. Please think about what you have read and write thoughtful answers. There are no right or wrong answers to most questions. The questions are written to encourage you to think about the importance of character and leadership. Make sure you write clearly so your teacher can read your answers. You may use the back of this page if needed.

1. Define the word responsibility.

2. Why should everyone accept responsibility for his or her actions?

3. Who is Wilhelm Rontgen? What did he do?

4. Describe why it’s not a good idea to blame someone else for your mistakes?

5. What would school be like if no one accepted responsibility?
6. Can you think of a job where you don’t have to take responsibility for your actions? Name two jobs where taking responsibility for your mistakes would be important.

7. Why are you being fair to yourself and others when you take responsibility?

8. In your opinion, what were the three most important tips given in this packet about accepting responsibility? Why?

9. What do you get from others when you are honest about your mistakes? Why?

10. Is there any difference between being responsible and accepting responsibility? Explain.
Accepting Responsibility

Questions for Classroom Discussion

These questions are designed to provoke discussion and encourage students to see the value of character and leadership. Teachers are invited to modify, add or delete questions at their discretion but the copyright must remain.

1. Why should leaders accept responsibility for their mistakes?

2. What is wrong with blaming a mistake on someone else? What is wrong with denying a mistake?

3. What is the best way to learn from a mistake?

4. Are all mistakes bad? Give an example of where a mistake turned out to be something positive.

5. What kind of person was Fay?

6. Was she really a good friend to Amanda and Ava?

7. Why did Fay try to set-up Jackie to take the blame? How did it backfire?

8. What lesson if any might Fay have learned from her wrongdoings?

9. What kind of a person was Byron?

10. What mistake did he make?

11. How did he react to his mistake? Do you think he learned a lesson?


13. Explain what you think Joan Didion meant by her quote.

14. Why does admitting mistakes help build self-confidence?

15. What do you think the meaning is of this quote? “When you blame others, you give up your power to change.”