

# Character Dilemmas

For journaling or writing essays, discussion, debate, role-playing, reflection

Suppose that . . .

① Your four-year-old nephew asks you if Santa Claus is real. You can tell by the way he asks that he still wants to believe in Santa Claus. Are you lying if you say yes? Give a reason for your opinion, and look at both sides.

② You're living in Belgium during World War II, and you're secretly hiding a Jewish family in your attic. The police show up at your door and ask if you're harboring Jews. Do you lie or tell the truth? Are there times when you might make a greater mistake by telling the truth than by lying? Give other examples to support your opinion.

③ A salesperson at a clothing store works on commission. (This means that she earns a small salary plus a percentage of anything she sells.) A customer tries on a suit that's much too tight for her. When the customer asks "How do I look?" is it the salesperson's responsibility to tell the truth? Why or why not?

④ You're a doctor, and one of your patients has severe heart disease. You discover that he also has incurable cancer. Should you tell him about the cancer, knowing that the stress of hearing the news might bring on a heart attack? Or should you say nothing and do your best to treat him?

⑤ The President of the United States (or the leader of your country) has learned about a new communications device that will allow the U.S. government to discover where other countries store their weapons. The same device can also be used to snoop on people in the U.S. Is the President obligated to tell the people about the new device? Why or why not?

⑥ One night, while your parents are away, your brother drives your mother's car without her permission. He doesn't hurt it, and he

even puts gas in the tank on his way home. The one thing he *doesn't* do is put the keys back exactly where he found them. Later, your mom asks you both if anyone moved the keys. Your brother says "Not me." He avoids looking at you. What might you say and why? Should you cover for him, stay silent, or tell?

## Activities

**WRITE AND PERFORM A SKIT** in which you and a friend debate the saying "Honesty is the best policy." This saying has been credited to two famous people: Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), author of *Don Quixote*, and George Washington (1732–1799), the first President of the United States. To add interest to your debate, one of you might play the role of either Cervantes or Washington (in costume, of course).

**DISCUSS WITH YOUR CLASS, CLUB,** or family what it means to "live a lie." Brainstorm examples of lies that people might "live" and reasons why they might do this.

**LIST EXAMPLES** of what honesty means to you. *Example:* "Honesty means stopping for a red light even when no one is around." Ask your friends to make similar lists. Combine your lists in a booklet to share with your class, school, club, family, or faith community.

**ROLE-PLAY HOW YOU MIGHT RESPOND IF:**

- ③ a friend invites you to his house to watch an R-rated movie, and your parents have made you promise not to watch R-rated movies
- ③ a friend asks you to keep a secret, then tells you she's planning to run away from home
- ③ a friend you're shopping with slips a CD into his jacket and walks out of the store without paying for it.

**RESEARCH WHISTLE-BLOWERS.** A whistle-blower is someone who goes public about an unfair, unsafe, or unethical practice in his or her workplace or somewhere else. (*Example:* An employee learns that his company is illegally dumping toxic waste into a stream, then takes the story to the local media.)

Whistle-blowers may get fired or face other types of abuse. Ask your librarian to help you search newspaper archives for stories about whistle-blowers. For each story, decide if you think the whistle-blower did the right thing.

*Variation:* Talk about what journalist Bill Moyers has said about whistle-blowers: "They're not always right, they don't always win, and they're not always likable. They break the china and rattle the cages of conformity. What would America be without them? They keep the high and mighty on their toes and the majority on notice." Based on what you learned from your research, do you agree or disagree?

**STUDY HONESTY (AND DISHONESTY)** in advertising. Read ads in newspapers and magazines and watch them on TV. When do advertisements exaggerate, make promises that seem unrealistic, and make comparisons with other products that seem unfair? Do they use words like *always*, *never*, *perfect*, and *best*? Collect examples of your research. Compile an "Honesty in Advertising?" booklet. Include your evaluation of each advertisement and a list of guidelines that you think would help to ensure honesty and fairness in advertising.

"Advertising may be described as the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it."

*Stephen Leacock*

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## CHECK IT OUT



*Caution: This May Be an Advertisement: A Teen Guide to Advertising* by Kathlyn Gay (Danbury, CT: Franklin Watts, 1992). Examines the persuasive techniques used by advertisers and their effects on consumers. Ages 14–18.

### Adbusters

The Media Foundation  
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A quarterly magazine published in Vancouver, *Adbusters* is for people who are tired of TV and magazine ads full of stereotypes, sexism, and propaganda. You might ask your library to subscribe. The Web site includes articles from past issues, previews of upcoming issues, and more.

**LEARN ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP** between honesty and health. Invite a mental health expert to your class to talk on this topic. Are honest people more or less healthy than dishonest people? Are there any diseases or illnesses that seem to be linked to dishonesty and guilt?

**LEARN ABOUT HONESTY** in scientific or medical research. Interview researchers at a local university. Do this in person or, if there's no university nearby, by telephone, mail, or email. (To identify researchers you might want to interview, check the faculty biographies on the university's Web site.) Ask each person a series of questions about honesty in research. You might ask questions like these:

- ? Can you give any examples of researchers who have exaggerated or minimized test results to try to prove something?
- ? What happens to people who manipulate research results and get caught?
- ? How common is manipulation of research results in your area of study?
- ? Are there any safeguards in place to increase the chances of honest research and reporting? If so, what are they?
- ? Do you know of any cases where results were manipulated and something terrible happened?

**COMPARE NATIONAL HONESTY** with local honesty. Contact the National Crime Prevention Council and request the latest statistics for juvenile robbery, burglary, or shoplifting. Next, contact your local police department and request similar numbers from them. Are your local statistics higher or lower than the national numbers? Make a graph to show what you've learned and share it with your class, school, or community.

*Variation:* Meet with your local police, city or community council, juvenile justice department, or intervention program to make a plan for lowering crime local statistics. Ask how you can help.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See "Safety," pages 234–244.