

Character Dilemmas

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

Suppose that ...

1 You're 16 years old and you really want to buy a car. Currently you're depending on your family and the bus for rides. You're already working three nights a week after school and every Saturday, and you're thinking about working even more hours—every night after school and Sundays, too. It would be hard to find time to do homework, and you'd have to drop your extracurricular activities, but you'd be able to buy your car a lot sooner. What would be the wise thing to do? Justify your answer.

2 You're a parent whose 14-year-old son has been acting strangely lately. He's skipping classes, not doing his homework, coming home late at night, and spending all of his time at home in his room with the door closed. He's also moody and short-tempered. The whole family is worried about him. What would be the wise thing to do?

3 Your best friend's father was injured on the job and can't work until he recovers. Your friend was planning to start college this fall, but her parents want her to work full-time to help the family until her father returns to work. Now your friend is asking for your advice. Should she go to college (she's on full scholarship) or delay starting until her father can work? She's worried about losing her scholarship . . . but she wants to help her family, too. What's the wisest advice you could give your friend?

4 You think that your parents are too strict with you. They expect you to come home every day after school and do homework for at least two hours; they only let you watch certain TV shows; and they think your friends are "bad influences" and won't let you go to parties with them. Your friends are starting to ignore you because you're never available to hang out with them. One day they invite you to a party on Friday night. You know that the parents will be at home and there's no chance that anything bad might happen—but you also

know that your parents won't let you go just because. Your friends encourage you to wait until they're asleep and sneak out your bedroom window. There's an excellent chance that your parents will never know. What's the wisest thing you can do? How might you respect your parents' wishes and also develop friendships? How might you get them to agree to be less strict with you?

5 Your big sister picks on you all the time. One day, she scratches your parents' car when she takes it for a drive without their permission. She begs you to tell them that *you* accidentally scratched it with your bike as you rode into the carport. She promises that she'll never pick on you again if you'll cover for her. What are the wisest things you can do to help yourself, your sister, and your parents the most?

Activities

WRITE A SHORT STORY about someone who demonstrates wisdom by delaying gratification—by waiting for the right time to do or get something he or she wants. *Example:* A teenager wants a new CD player but decides to save his money for college instead.

WRITE A POEM OR LIMERICK about age vs. wisdom. Are older people necessarily wiser than younger people? What does wisdom mean? You decide.

DEBATE WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT—knowledge or wisdom. Which comes first? Can you have one without the other? Are there times when one should take precedence over the other? When? How? Why?

EXPLORE ALBERT EINSTEIN'S BRAIN. During the 1980s, Berkeley professor and brain researcher Marian Diamond acquired portions of Einstein's brain and studied them closely. She discovered that Einstein's brain had more glial cells per neuron than the average human brain. (Glial cells "glue" your brain together in synaptic connections; the more synaptic connections you have, the better.) Einstein was not only a mathematical genius, he was also a very wise man. Learn more about his brain and the scientist who studied it. Share your findings with your class, club, or family.

CHECK IT OUT



The Human Brain Coloring Book by Marian C. Diamond (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1985). A fun way to learn about the brain, written by the California scientist who studied Einstein's brain.

Neuroscience for Kids

<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~chudler/neurok.html>
Do a search for "Marian Diamond" and find a link to a biography of this distinguished scientist (and beloved teacher).

EXPLORE EINSTEIN'S THEORY of time dilation. Stated simply, this theory proposes that the faster you travel, the slower time goes. Do you believe it? What might this theory mean to space travel? To colonizing other planets? Write your own version of this theory, using an example. Be sure to draw on your wisdom as well as your knowledge.

MAKE A DRAWING, PAINTING, or sculpture of Athena, the goddess of wisdom from Greek mythology. What did the Greeks believe about her? What was her role in Greek legend? You might research other examples of art (paintings, sculptures, mosaics, etc.) that feature Athena.

CREATE A CHART SHOWING SYMBOLS of wisdom used by various cultures around the world.¹ *Examples:* ant, crane, elephant, hedgehog, lotus, owl, pearl, scepter, tree. Include brief explanations of why each was believed to symbolize wisdom.

RESEARCH THE LIFE OF A WISE PERSON from the past. Try to discover if he or she lived by any particular "rules of wisdom." Find examples of wise things the person did or said. Share your findings on a chart or poster. You might title it "The Wisdom of . . ." You might research one of the following people (or choose someone else who interests you):

- ❖ Jane Addams
- ❖ Susan B. Anthony
- ❖ Saint Augustine
- ❖ Marcus Aurelius
- ❖ Pearl S. Buck

- ❖ Buddha
- ❖ Confucius
- ❖ Albert Einstein
- ❖ Ralph Waldo Emerson
- ❖ Epictetus
- ❖ Anne Frank
- ❖ Benjamin Franklin
- ❖ Mohandas Gandhi
- ❖ Thomas Jefferson
- ❖ Jesus
- ❖ Learned Hand
- ❖ Thomas Hobbes
- ❖ Immanuel Kant
- ❖ Helen Keller
- ❖ Martin Luther King Jr.
- ❖ Lao Tzu
- ❖ Abraham Lincoln
- ❖ Anne Morrow Lindbergh
- ❖ Nelson Mandela
- ❖ Abraham Maslow
- ❖ Moses
- ❖ Satchel Paige
- ❖ Plato
- ❖ Eleanor Roosevelt
- ❖ Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- ❖ Albert Schweitzer
- ❖ Chief Seattle
- ❖ King Solomon
- ❖ Elizabeth Cady Stanton
- ❖ Mother Teresa
- ❖ Mark Twain
- ❖ Voltaire
- ❖ Malcolm X

Variation: Research the life of a wise person from the present. This can be anyone you admire or respect; it doesn't have to be a famous person.

LEARN HOW WISE PEOPLE have been treated throughout history. Have different countries and cultures traditionally revered wise people . . . or feared them? Can you see any relationship between how successful countries and cultures are and how much they respect wisdom and knowledge? You might look at ancient Egypt, classical Greece, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Nazi Germany, etc.

¹ See "Positive Attitudes," page 18, for a resource on symbols and symbolism.

INTERVIEW A NATIVE AMERICAN to learn how members of his or her tribe pass on their knowledge and wisdom to younger generations. Or interview someone from another culture.

INTERVIEW ELDERS IN YOUR OWN FAMILY. Sit down and talk with your grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc. Or, if you live too far away to do this in person, write letters. Ask them to share their wisdom with you. What advice would they like to give you? What's the most important life lesson they have learned?

HAVE A FAMILY PLANNING SESSION. Sit down together and brainstorm goals for your family's future—next week, next month, next year, next five years, and so on.² Share and respect each other's wisdom. Decide together on five or ten goals you'd like to actively pursue. You might also ask your family to help you plan your personal goals.

COLLECT WORDS OF WISDOM. Search books of quotations, books by writers you admire, and so on for quotations that inspire you with their wisdom. Make posters, collages, or clay tablets inscribed with your words of wisdom. Hang them around your school, club, classroom, or home.

Variation: Illustrate your words of wisdom with colorful cartoons and share them with younger kids.

LOOK FOR THE WISDOM IN POPULAR SONGS of the past. TIP: You might research folk songs, spirituals, patriotic songs, protest songs, etc.

Variation: Look for the wisdom in popular songs of the present. Is there a songwriter or group that you feel is especially wise? Give reasons why you feel that way.

PLAY A “WHO’S THE WISER?” GAME. Divide your class or club into two teams and three judges. A judge reads one of the dilemmas presented below. (Or your group can create its own original dilemmas.) Each team has two minutes to come up with a wise solution to the dilemma—or, if a solution isn't possible, at least a way to make things better. The teams present their solutions/ideas to the three judges, and they have two minutes to decide which solution/idea was the wiser. The team with the wiser solution/idea gets two points. If the judges can't agree, or if the solutions/ideas really

do seem equal, then both teams get two points. Play for 10–15 minutes or as long as people are interested in playing. **IMPORTANT:** Keep the game light. Avoid arguments. If necessary, stop the game to debrief and discuss.

1. You're the parent of two children who both want to take piano lessons. Your children are very competitive and jealous of each other.
2. You sense that your mother is deeply troubled about something, but when you ask “What's wrong?” she says “Nothing.”
3. A group of kids in your neighborhood are pestering you to hang out with them. You don't trust them, you're even a little afraid of them, and you certainly don't want to hang out with them.
4. You're a bus driver on a city route. Two of your passengers start arguing with each other, and suddenly one pulls a knife.
5. You're the only doctor present in a hospital emergency room when two patients come in at the same time. One is a small child with head injuries from a bicycle accident; another is a doctor who's bleeding from injuries sustained in an automobile accident. Both require your immediate attention.
6. You have a friend who doesn't get along with her family, and she decides to run away from home. She confides in you and asks you not to tell anyone.
7. You deliver newspapers to a senior citizen in your neighborhood, and you often stop to talk with him. One day he tells you that his children—all adults—want him to sell his house and move into an apartment. He wants to make them happy, but he loves his home.
8. You're walking to school one morning when you notice smoke coming out of a window of a house in your neighborhood. You know the people who live there—a family with three small children. The smoke is coming from an upstairs bedroom window.
9. Two of your friends are always fighting with each other. You like them both, but you don't want to be caught in the middle. Now they're saying that you have to choose between them.

² See “Purpose,” pages 195–197, for goal-setting steps.

10. You're a government diplomat, and you've just been asked to negotiate peace talks between two nations that have traditionally fought and distrusted each other.

READ STORIES ABOUT WISDOM. Look for these books:

☞ *The Boy Who Lost His Face* by Louis Sachar (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997). When David helps his schoolmates attack an elderly woman, she puts a curse on him. With the help of new friends and a very nice girl, he learns that popularity isn't everything. Ages 10–13.

☞ *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993). Given his lifetime assignment at the Ceremony of Twelve, Jonas becomes the receiver of memories shared by only one other in his community and discovers the terrible truth about the society in which he lives. Ages 12 & up.

☞ *The Midwife's Apprentice* by Karen Cushman (New York: Clarion, 1995). A nameless, home-

less girl is taken in by a sharp-tempered midwife, and in spite of obstacles and hardship, she eventually gains the three things she wants most and learns just how wise she really is. Ages 12 & up.

☞ *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse (New York: Fine Communications, 1994). This book tells the story of Siddhartha, the young Buddha, and his determination to reach nirvana, the ultimate state of enlightenment. Originally published in 1951. Ages 13 & up.

☞ *Winter Camp* by Kirkpatrick Hill (New York: Margaret McElderry Books, 1993). After the death of both their parents, a brother and sister move in with their neighbor Natasha, an old Athabascan Indian woman who believes that learning to work and live in the woods is as important as reading books and going to school. When winter comes and their skills are put to the test, they realize the wisdom of the "old ways." Ages 10 & up.

Character in *ACTION*

Elisha Williams: Young but Wise

Sixteen-year-old Elisha Williams clung to the tree trunk with shaking knees. He *would not* give up. He *would* climb this 50-foot tree, walk the thin line, and rappel down. "I have this thing about heights," Elisha explains, recalling the experience. "I used to be afraid of diving boards until I practiced and got over it. So I knew I could do this, too."

And he did. But there was another girl in his group who was terrified by the ropes course. Crying loudly, she backed down after climbing halfway up the tree. Elisha walked over to her and said "It's okay. There are some things we're so afraid to do that it might take someone else to help us through it. It doesn't make a difference how far you go, if you just try." She wiped her eyes and smiled at him gratefully.

Elisha believes that without struggle, progress isn't possible. And he knows what he's talking about, because his own life has been a struggle. When he was very young, he "grew up on the road" because his mother was a traveling preacher. It wasn't easy

sleeping in a different bed almost every night. Then, when Elisha was in grade school, he and his mom finally settled in Columbia, Missouri. They had little money, but they refused to accept welfare. Elisha did his part to make sure that they could support themselves. He sold subscription cards for *Boys' Life*, shoveled snow, and did chores for people. When he was old enough to get a job, he bussed dishes at a restaurant and bagged groceries at a store. He shared his earnings with his mother.

Although Elisha's friends were kids who rode bikes, went fishing, and stayed out of trouble, there was violence elsewhere in their neighborhood. One day, Elisha was outside playing with his LEGOs when a man carrying a gun rushed past. He came so close that Elisha could have reached out and touched him. "Another kid got killed when he crossed an alley nearby," Elisha says. "I heard the shot."

Often, street fights happened outside his apartment building, and once a gang member was shot.