

Making Ethical Decisions: A Guide for Kids (and Parents and Teachers too)

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Life is full of ethical decisions, and using computer technology and networking is no different. Kids, parents and teachers are constantly facing decisions about whether it's right or wrong to act in alternative ways. One of the problems we face is that very few people can explain how they come to make an ethical decision. Some people seem to think that ethical decisions are at about the same level of reasoning as their preference for a particular flavor of ice-cream. They'll say, "I like strawberry; you like pistachio — and who's to say if it's right or wrong?"

It's not quite as harmless when the question is whether to break into a system or not, or whether to spread lies on the Internet about someone who's offended you — or about a company whose stock you intend profit from if you can scare others into selling theirs at a lower price.

It's helpful to know how other people have learned how to make ethical decisions. That way you can see if their ways of thinking about how to act can be useful to you.

This article doesn't give you any guidelines on what your decisions should be; it's just looking at how people decide such questions.

The basic idea about making ethical decisions is that there's a series of questions you can ask yourself. For example, we've seen that sometimes there are laws about what you can do and what you can't do legally. That's probably the first thing you have to find out when you're thinking about something. Is it legal or not? Although there are exceptions, in general you shouldn't break the law to attain your ends. Try to think of other ways of reaching your goal — or see if you can get the law changed! In countries where democracy rules, you can sometimes get laws changed by convincing a lot of people that your approach is better than what we have now.

Next, you have to realize that there are lots of other ways that people guide their behavior. For instance, there are rules, customs, expectations, habits — all kinds of guides to behavior. These guidelines vary from country to country and even within countries. There are guidelines for doctors and guidelines for automobile mechanics; for teachers and for students; for grocery-store clerks and police officers. Religious communities have rules, too, and you'll want to think about whether your own beliefs and your family's heritage can help you decide what to do.

You can ask whether there are any written rules that you ought to think about when deciding what to do. In a company, for example, maybe there are policies that employees agree to follow when they're hired. Or when you join an Internet service provider (ISP), there's usually a code of conduct or terms of service that tell you what you're allowed to do and what's forbidden — sending spam, for example, is forbidden by most ISPs. Your school should have rules on how you are supposed to use school computers, including perhaps limits on what kinds of Web sites you are supposed to visit. Some families even write down their own, normally unwritten, rules so that everyone can agree on exactly what they can do with the family computer(s).

In many places around the world, people shape their actions by thinking about the Golden Rule: to imagine themselves in another's place and see if they'd like to have a particular action done to themselves just like they're thinking of doing it to others.

There are some easy questions you can ask yourself, too, and I've put them into many of the "What do you think" sections. For example, does the idea feel wrong? Would you tell your parents? Would you like to have your action shown on national TV? Would you be proud of yourself in public for having done what you're thinking about?

Another kind of question is about who wins and who loses in each of the choices you

make. Would your action hurt others? violate their privacy? take their property? make others pay for your own (usually secret) benefit?

Then there are principles — baseline rules that we grow to accept as guides for our behavior and for judging other people's behavior. For example, would a proposed action break someone's trust in you? hurt someone's feelings? be unjust or unfair? involve untruths? On the other side, would what you're thinking about make you a better person? make you kinder? make you smarter? make you proud of your integrity?

What about respect? Does your idea show respect for other people or does it treat them as tools for your own gain? Would you feel "used" if someone did what you are thinking about to you?

And what if everyone acted as you suggest — would that be good or bad in general? It's like walking across the grass in a pretty garden instead of taking a couple of extra steps to stay on the path: if you're the only one doing it, it may not hurt the grass. But if everyone did it, soon there'd be a muddy path across the corner instead of the grass.

I hope that this brief introduction to ethical decision-making was interesting to you. Please feel free to share it with your friends, your parents, and your teachers.

For further reading and discussion

Australian Institute of Computer Ethics — very serious papers from a conference; might be helpful to teachers. <http://www.aice.swin.edu.au/events/AICEC99/webabstractsindex.html>

Computer Ethics resources of all kinds from ThinkQuest including the latest on ethics cases in the news. <http://library.thinkquest.org/26658/>

Ethics and Information Technology — professional journal for your school, college or public library. http://www.wkap.nl/journals/ethics_it

Institute for Global Ethics — has real ethical dilemmas posted in a database with real-world decisions by the people involved. <http://www.globoethics.org/>

Kallman, E. A. & J. P. Grillo (1996). *Ethical Decision Making and Information Technology: An Introduction with Cases, Second Edition*. ISBN 0-07-034090-0. xiv + 138. Index.

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.
<http://www.scu.edu/SCU/Centers/Ethics/homepage.shtml>

Mississippi State University site with lots of resources on computer ethics.
<http://cyberethics.cbi.msstate.edu/>

North Carolina State University site with links to many other academic computer-ethics sites.
<http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/users/j/jherkert/ethicind.html>

Online Ethics Center. <http://onlineethics.org/>

Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions at Indiana University.
<http://www.indiana.edu/~poynter/index.html>

Scholarly resources on ethics from DePaul University including extensive lists of texts and readings. <http://www.depaul.edu/ethics/consultants.html>

University of British Columbia Centre for Applied Ethics. <http://www.ethics.ubc.ca/>