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How to Stop the Plagiarism Plague

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by Candace Lindemann Ed.M.

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Plagiarism. It's more common than you might think. Three out of ten students, at some point in their school career, have risked it all by copying someone else's work. How can parents and educators help students avoid this error?

The first step is to correct student misconceptions about plagiarism. "In many cases kids don't even realize what plagiarism is, when it applies, what's included, says Corinne Gregory, founder and president of the parent resource **Social Smarts**. "As adults we may make assumptions that kids know information found on the Internet, for example, may be copyrighted and not used, therefore, without permission."

Copying an entire paper, failing to credit an idea or cite a statistic, quoting without attribution, or even paraphrasing a source too closely are all examples of plagiarism. With a single term encompassing such a wide range of unintentional mistakes and intentional cheating, students desperately need guidance from educators and parents.

An Epidemic of Cheating

Plagiarism is wide-spread, according to a 2009 survey commissioned by **Common Sense Media**, a non-profit organization. Among students in grades 7-12, 21% have turned in a paper downloaded from the Internet. More than a third (38%) copied text from a website.

Perhaps more troubling, 36% said that downloading a paper from the Internet was not a serious cheating offense and 19% said it is not cheating at all.

A Complex Web of Causes

At the root of at least some instances of plagiarism is confusion about the writing process.

Steve Peha, founder of **Teaching That Makes Sense, Inc.**, admitted that, as a young student, he once plagiarized because he had no understanding of the assignment. Peha believes, “We can combat plagiarism by simply teaching kids how to write and how to produce the kinds of writing we're interested in.”

Other students understand that plagiarism is against the rules, but fail to see any real harm in the theft of ideas or phrases. And as “digital natives,” today’s students may be familiar with collaborative or open-source projects. And, they are also accustomed to seeing work copied from website to website without proper attribution.

Even students who fully understand the meaning and consequences of plagiarism may continue to copy papers to remain academically competitive.

“Kids are under pressure to do whatever it takes to make the grade, get into the right college or university, and plagiarism is one of tactics to which they resort,” explained Gregory. Overwhelmed and up against deadlines, some students succumb to the temptation of shortcuts.

Stolley also suggested that students may be responding to a tone of apathy set by their teachers. “They may sense a lack of interest or investment in the course material on the part of the instructor...Writing is hard, after all. And to pour all kinds of effort into a paper only to get a letter grade with an occasional ‘awk’ or other meaningless comment in the margins is enough to make some students think that what they write doesn't really matter.”

With limited time and energy, students focus on the efforts they believe will benefit them the most.

Teaching Academic Integrity

The good news is you can help your child understand and avoid plagiarism. Talking about plagiarism can be complicated, however. According to the Common Sense Media report, 80% of parents say they have addressed cheating with their kids, but only 64% of teens recall this conversation. How do you make sure the message sticks?

- **Discuss plagiarism:** Use meaningful examples, such as music sampling, to explore the concept of intellectual property. Lead children in developing their own explanation of why it is important to credit the words and ideas of others. Helpful resources for home and classroom exploration include: **Copyright Kids** (Copyright Society of the USA) **Interactive Copyright Activity** (CyberBee) **Adina's Deck: The Case of the Plagiarized Paper** (Video) **The Paul Robeson Library Video and Interactive Quiz on Plagiarism** (Rutgers) **Avoiding Plagiarism** (OWL at Purdue) **Bruin Success with Less Stress** (UCLA)
- **Practice good researching and writing skills:** Provide instruction in compiling research notes. Peha warned, "Telling kids to 'paraphrase' things makes little sense. It's just a version of bad plagiarizing. Teaching kids reading strategies like synthesis, however, is very helpful." (See these tips for "**Undertaking the Long Paper**")
- **Review school and class policies:** Understand the definition of plagiarism, the preferred system of citation, and the consequences of plagiarizing.
- **Teachers can strive to create "plagiarism-proof" assignments:** Innovative assignments that are "easier to complete honestly than to cheat on" remove the incentive for plagiarizing, according to Greg Van Belle, Professor of English at Edmonds Community College. "We can't change the fact that students are increasingly stretched thin by work and family...We can't stop students from taking too many classes or adding too many activities to their schedules. What we can do is teach better." Instead, Van Belle suggested "individualizing" assignments by requiring students to write creatively, take a different perspective, or relate topics to issues of local or personal importance.
- **Emphasize the process:** Students who lack time management skills or confidence may procrastinate and then be tempted to copy as deadlines approach. Scaffolding the assignment allows educators and parents to provide support and input as the student works through the writing steps. Kate Povejsil, VP of Marketing at Turnitin.com elaborated, "What students need during this process is lots and lots of substantive feedback—from their instructors and from their peers. They need high quality, frequent feedback that applies directly to their paper and their writing—not a bunch of rules and guidelines and 'do's and don't's.'" By emphasizing the process over the result, the student learns more, improves his organization skills, and even finishes with a stronger paper.
- **Work in public:** Van Belle also has his students work "in full view of the world." If students complete some of the writing steps in class or with peers, they receive feedback as part of their process. And when everyone is looking, it is harder to cheat.
- **Utilize technology:** Many popular word processing programs now automatically manage sources. Sites such as **NoodleTools** offer some free assistance with proper citation. Plagiarism detection tools, such as **Turnitin** and its new program for student writers, **Write Check**, can serve as a preventative measure and teaching tool. Using these services as part of the process helps students identify and improve upon areas of concern.
- **Value writing:** Show your children that you value writing as a means of expression and argumentation. Rather than emphasizing "morality tales" of writers who have gone astray, Stolley recommended focusing on the importance of rigorous thought and proper citation in a student's academic development: "When students cheat on writing, particularly wholesale copying of another's work, they are missing out on a very important part of their education."

- **Model honesty and integrity:** Our actions provide the most vivid lesson. Always give credit where credit is due and explain to your kids how citing your source bolsters your argument and is the right thing to do.

Candace Lindemann, an educational consultant, has five years of classroom experience and holds a B.A. from Yale University and an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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