

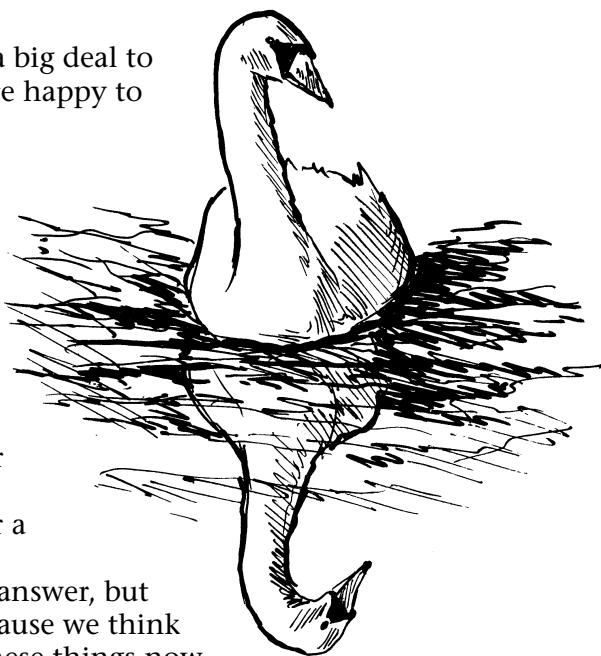
Chapter 23

Acceptance: Learning to See Beneath the Surface

Being accepted by others is a big deal to most people. Very few people are happy to sit on the sidelines without any friends. Although it is great to have friends and to be one of the crowd, sometimes you have to ask yourself what is most important to you. When your friends start to get into activities that seem questionable or outright wrong what do you do? Do you go along with the crowd, or do you step aside—even if it means being without friends for a while?

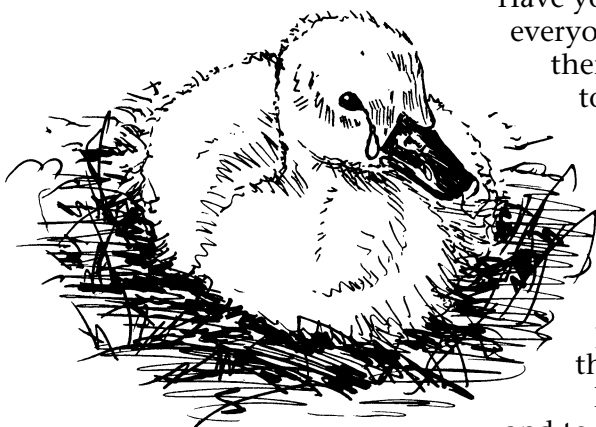
These are hard questions to answer, but we want to talk about them because we think that the way you think about these things now may help you to make the right choices in the future—when your values are challenged. Values? What are those again? Values are what you find to be important. We have been talking about values all along—the importance of being honest, respectful and responsible... to name just a few.

Some people are left out a lot. They are left out, and even treated badly, because they are different somehow. Do you think



that this is only a problem in school? No! This a problem that touches many people, in many circumstances. When you make judgments about a person's character based on some external information, you are making a *prejudiced* judgment. You are judging a person by the way he looks, speaks or how much money he has (just to name a few of the possibilities). So we are going to talk about accepting others, and learning to look beyond appearances before making a judgment about a person. We have a lot to think about in this chapter, so let's get started.

Being the One Left Out



Have you ever been left out? Almost everyone has been left out sometime in their life. Maybe you weren't invited to a party, or your friends all went to the mall over the weekend and no one called you. Perhaps your brother or sister invited friends over but didn't include you. There are lots of ways to be left out, but no matter how a person is left out, the feeling is the same—it hurts!

Everyone wants to be important and to be liked. No one likes to be left out. What are some of the feelings a person has when she is left out? Here is what one group of teens said:

- ☹ *I feel like no one likes me.*
- ☹ *Maybe I am ugly or no one cares about me.*
- ☹ *I wonder what I did wrong.*
- ☹ *How could they forget about me?*
- ☹ *I guess I am not that important.*

If you think about how you feel when you are left out, how it hurts, do you think that maybe you will be more likely to be careful not to leave other people out? What can you do to help include others? What does it mean to accept someone?

When our family moved from Italy my parents stopped speaking Italian to us. They wanted our English to be perfect so that we would fit in

and be treated like everyone else. I was only four when we came to the States and now I can't really speak Italian. I understand why they did what they did but I am sad not to have that part of my original land. On the other hand, people do treat me as if I was always here. I feel like an American, like this is my country.

Federico, 22

Accepting Someone Else

All people are different. No two people are exactly the same. Most people try to stay near people who are most like them. Look at your friends. In what ways are you similar? Do you have the same hobbies? Do you like the same kinds of movies? Do you like to talk about the same things? Chances are that you have a lot in common, and that you are similar in many ways.

But what about people who are different from you? Just like you, everyone needs to feel that they are important. If a person is different from others, he may be left out of many things. But why? Isn't it sometimes more interesting to learn new things and to talk to people who are not like you? How can you accept other people even if they are different from you?

Last year I was in a bad accident and I have been in a wheelchair since then. It feels strange to me because sometimes people treat me differently. Some people seem like they are afraid to look at me. One little boy said he didn't want to touch me because he thought he could actually catch whatever problem I had that put me in the chair! Others treat me especially nicely, I can tell that they feel sorry for me. More than anything I want people to see me and not the metal chair I'm in. I want to say, "Look at me and not my wheelchair!"

Linda, 15

The New Person

Have you ever been new in your school, in your neighborhood, or in any situation? What does it feel like to be new? How do you act when you do not know anyone but everyone else already knows one another? It is hard to be new, especially if you are changing schools. How could you help make someone new feel more comfortable? You could do many things in this situation. You could: talk to that person; introduce that person to some of your friends; invite her to sit with you during lunch; or even invite that person to do something with you and your friends

after school.

We're not suggesting that you have to become best friends with every new person who comes to your school. We are suggesting that by helping a new person out, you may make a big difference in their life. It is hard to be new and to try to make new friends all over again. A little bit of kindness goes a long way.

Being Different

Sometimes you have to be left out. It is not good to always go along with everyone in everything that they do because sometimes they may want to do things that you do not want to do. Even though it is hard to feel rejected, it is good to think through things before acting. What if your friends wanted to do something that you knew was wrong? You may have to risk being different or being rejected by your friends. If your friends cannot accept you, and respect what is important to you, then perhaps they are not really your friends at all.

What are you not willing to do, even if your friends think it is a great idea? Here is what some teens from Virginia said (yes, it's the same group as above!):

- ☞ *I am not willing to try drugs, even though once I was really pushed. I have already made up my mind not to get into drugs. I have too much to look forward to in life, too many things to do.*
- ☞ *My boyfriend tried to get me to sleep with him. I told him: "If you love me, then you'll respect that I am not going to sleep with you or anyone else, for that matter." Well, I guess he didn't love me because we broke up. I am glad that I made my mind up ahead of time. He was a real loser, but it still hurt my feelings.*
- ☞ *Three of my friends got really heavy into cheating. They cheated on everything, they made up this system because we all have the same teachers at different times. I have always taken my school-work pretty seriously. I cheated with them for a few weeks, but then I said, "Forget it, I'm not doing this anymore." I just felt like such a liar in front of my teachers and myself. It was hard to be treated like trash by them afterwards.*
- ☞ *Two of my girlfriends started shoplifting. At first I was going to try it, but when it came time to take something this voice inside my head said, "Pammy, this is wrong, don't go down this road." They said I was a goody-goody and they made fun of me in school. It really hurt, but I can't go against what I know is right.*

What are you going to say no to if your friends ask? It's a good idea to think about it now, because you never know when you are going to have to make an important decision. How strong can you be? It's hard to say no to your friends, especially if they pressure you. If your friends are pressuring you to go against your conscience, do you think that it is possible that you have made friends with the wrong people? A small mistake may not seem like a big deal at first, but if you continually go against your better judgment, you will find yourself going nowhere fast.

Being a Good Judge

Being friends does not mean that you accept everything your friends do as being right. Sometimes you will be in a situation where your judgment is the best tool you have. Your friends, or the people you are with, may suggest you do things that you do not want to do. They may say things like:

- ☞ *If you are really my friend you would do it!*
- ☞ *What's wrong with you?*
- ☞ *You are weird, why can't you be like the rest of us?*



If you do not want to do something that is wrong, if you do not agree to do what they are doing, then in a way you are judging them; you are using your good judgment to keep yourself out of situations that you know are damaging to yourself and others.

If you are ever in doubt, ask your inner voice. *Am I making a mistake by doing this? Will I regret it later? Am I hurting myself or anyone else? How will this affect me in the future?* We are convinced that your inner voice will help you to make the right decision. But it isn't that easy. It doesn't stop there. In order to make the right decision in a stressful situation, you will not only have to listen to your inner voice, you will also have to follow its advice. That's the tricky part.

Is Your Friend a Friend?

It is easier to do what you know is right when you are friends with people who are also trying to keep from hurting themselves and others. Keeping in mind that you want to be the kind of person who can see the good in other people and not make snap

judgments (which often turn out to be misjudgments), it is important to form your judgments wisely. You may want to think carefully about what kind of friends you hang out with.

Sometimes people make mistakes in choosing a friend and they start to make bad choices. You may feel so strongly that you want others to like you and accept you that you are willing to do almost anything—even if you know it's wrong and you don't feel good about it. If your friends are encouraging you to do things that are making you feel badly, you may want to think about finding some new friends. One boy, who wants to remain anonymous, told us:

I was running down the wrong road at a 100 miles an hour. I was so lost in being cool that I was doing all kinds of things that I knew were wrong—drinking, skipping school, lying to my parents, hanging out with a much older crowd and stealing. One night I was caught helping my friend steal a motorcycle. I went to court and had to go to juvenile detention. My parents seemed to turn into total zombies. It was like living in my nightmare. Finally, I got out. I started school again at a new school, and I decided that was it. I wanted a new life. I wanted to be myself again—the way I was before all of that mess. And to think that I went through all of it just because I wanted people to think I was cool and tough. What a joke.

Some people learn the hard way, but we hope that you won't have to. You have what it takes to make decisions that will take you towards your goals and dreams. You will make mistakes along the way, but you have that little voice inside you to help you stay on the right track. Just remember to ask yourself where your actions will take you, if that is somewhere that you want to go, and how it may affect your future.

Making Judgments about Others

How do you feel when someone else finds all your faults and tells you about them? Have you ever had anyone say to you, *You are so slow!*, *You never understand me!* or *You are always complaining!* Sometimes it is good for you to hear from others so you can understand the way your actions affect other people, but even if it is good for you, you may find that your feelings get hurt.

Why is it so easy for a person to see what is wrong with another person's behavior, and yet it is so difficult for a person to see what is wrong with their own actions? Have you ever listened to

someone criticize another person behind their back and thought the person doing the criticizing was guilty of the same faults?

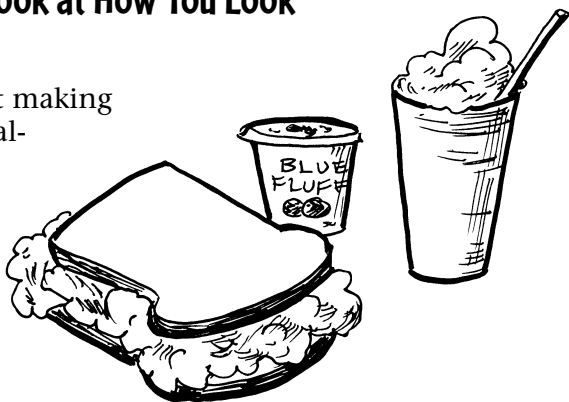
It doesn't feel good to be judged by others, and others don't feel good when you judge them either. Every human being has good things about him and some not so good things. How do you feel when someone sees the good in you? How do you feel if people see the bad in you? Can you make it a habit to look for the good things in other people? You may be surprised at all of the good you find. Every time you begin to say something bad about another person, try to stop yourself and say something good. If you don't have anything good to say, then don't say anything at all (we bet you've heard *that* before).

Facts and Fiction: Taking a Look at How You Look at Others

We have talked a lot about making good judgments when your values and your future are at stake. But what about judging other people? We mentioned that you will need to rely on your good judgment to keep you on the right track, but we haven't really talked about the importance of learning to look beneath the surface before you make a judgment about another person.

People who make quick judgments about others are usually basing their opinions on fluff. *What's fluff?* you may ask. Fluff is nothing. Is it possible that a person can make a wrong judgment about another person because he does not have enough information and he is jumping to conclusions?

Here are some judgments which were made based on fluff: *all blondes are absent-minded; all unmarried middle-aged women who own cats are lonely; all athletes are stupid; and, all smart people are nerds.* On the surface, such judgments may seem harmless, or even funny. But when we make unkind generalizations about groups of people, the fun doesn't usually last for long. In reality, it is not very effective to put people in boxes. Although some people from a certain group may fit a stereotype, not everyone will.



General statements about a group of people can be harmful. These generalizations are called *stereotypes*. Stereotypes are fixed ideas about a group of people. Stereotypes sometimes lead to people being treated like second-class citizens. When people are treated badly because of a stereotype, this is called *discrimination*. You have probably heard these words before, and maybe even discussed these ideas in school or at home. Stereotypes are so dangerous because they put a quick and easy label on a person—*stupid, brainy, sly, untrustworthy, cheap, dirty, piggy* and so on. These labels hurt—and not just the people being labeled; they hurt the person who says them, because that person is indulging in shallow and hateful practices.

People who have been hurt by such general ideas will be the first to tell you that it is not a good idea to make snap judgments. One of Dorothy's students, a young woman from West Virginia, told us how she felt when she moved to a new town in Virginia.

When I first started school here I got made fun of for my accent, because I am from West Virginia. I can't help who I am, I am just me. They called me names like redneck, and stupid. They said people from West Virginia didn't know how to cook and take care of ourselves. When I got home I cried and felt upset. All I wanted was to go through school and finish my year... Now I don't worry about it, I just hold my head up high and keep going.

Ann Marie

Being judged unfairly hurts. Before forming an opinion about another person, take a moment to think. In order to understand other people, and not just make your mind up about them because they fit into some category, you have to talk to that person individually. So, be smart and take the time to base your opinions on facts and not fiction.

If you were the one going to a new school, living in a new town or even moving to another country, how would you want other people to judge you? How would you feel if people based their opinions about you on appearances, like your name, your hair color, your skin color or the type of car your parents drove? It hurts to be misjudged! So, let's try to base our judgments on something more real than fluff.

Journal

What does the expression *Don't judge a book by its cover* mean? Have you ever misjudged someone? If so, how did you realize that you erred in your judgment?



To Do

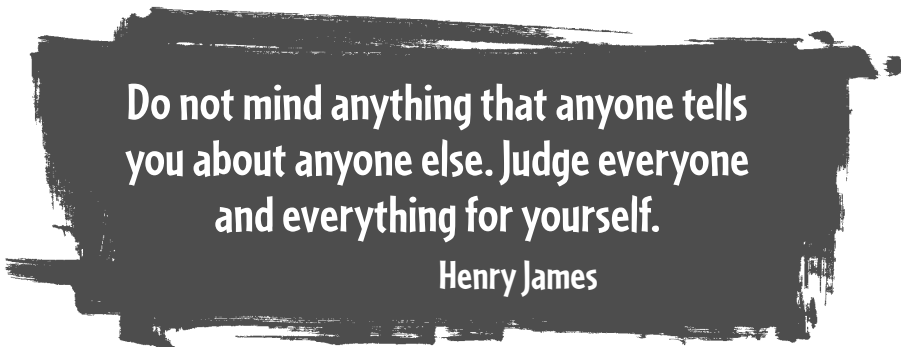


1. In groups of four, work together to demonstrate how people tell others that they accept them or reject them through their body language. This is a silent activity. Pick one person in your group to be the person who is being accepted or rejected and have the others show this happening through their body language. Before acting out your silent language, talk about the following:
 - *How do people show that they are accepting or rejecting another person by the expression on their face?*
 - *How do people show that they are accepting or rejecting another person by the way they stand, walk or talk?*
2. Imagine that you have to do a news report on TV. Your topic is: *The stupid mistakes people make by making quick judgments about others, based on fluff*. Try to think of as many mistakes as possible that people make and prepare a five-minute news report for your class.

Key Ideas



- ☉ All people experience being left out sometimes. Although it hurts, sometimes it is best to be left out, or to find new friends.
- ☉ "Small kindnesses" towards other people can make a huge difference, especially to someone who is new and doesn't have any friends yet.
- ☉ It is important not to judge people based on appearances or generalizations.



**Do not mind anything that anyone tells
you about anyone else. Judge everyone
and everything for yourself.**

Henry James