



DEFINING SHARED VALUES

What are ethical values anyway?

- The word *ethical* refers to behavior that conforms with the principles of right conduct.
- The word *value*, though, has at least two very different meanings:
 - 1) It can refer to the relative worth or importance of just about anything (such as monetary worth, artistic worth, or cultural worth).
 - 2) It can be used, more specifically, to define those principles or standards that are worthy in and of themselves, without regard to any other purpose.

Values that are not ethical in nature (see definition number 1 above) include musical values (do you like rap or rock?), artistic values (do you prefer oil paintings or cartoons?), and food values (do you like hamburgers or steak?), among others. In and of themselves, these preferences for one value over another have nothing to do with distinguishing right from wrong.

Ethical values, on the other hand, belong under definition number 2 of the word value. They are values—such as truth or honesty—that have intrinsic worth; that is, they are essential and important in and of themselves and not for some other, larger purpose.

Ethical values are about forming the ideal human character. An ideal person would be a perfect person, but we all know that nobody's perfect. So when we talk about trying to be ethical, we are talking about striving toward an ideal, but not about being perfect.

Why do we need ethical values? Because, for one thing, we are social beings. The reality is we need to get along. Stanford University professor John Gardner puts it this way: "The accomplishment of any group's purpose generally requires shared values firmly held. Survival may hang on whether the group does in fact have a deep allegiance to the values in question. [While] scholars are fascinated with divergence in value systems, the men and women who must keep a society functioning are always seeking the common ground that will make concerted action possible. They have no choice."

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What are ethical values that society requires we identify and pledge to uphold?

What would you put on your list? Imagine, for example, that you are on a student committee charged with the task of coming up with a code of ethical values for your school. What would be on it?

Brainstorm some of your ideas here:

- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 15. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 16. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 17. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 18. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 19. _____ |
| 6. _____ | 20. _____ |
| 7. _____ | 21. _____ |
| 8. _____ | 22. _____ |
| 9. _____ | 23. _____ |
| 10. _____ | 24. _____ |
| 11. _____ | 25. _____ |
| 12. _____ | 26. _____ |
| 13. _____ | 27. _____ |
| 14. _____ | 28. _____ |