

## AGE DIFFERENCES AND DISHONESTY IN HIGH SCHOOL

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### SUMMARY

1629 northeast Georgia adolescents, ages 13 thru 17+, attending 22 high schools, responded, anonymously, to questions asking about the cheating being practiced in their schools, their own projected and admitted deceitful behavior in certain educational situations, and their beliefs about effects of school deceit on contemporary society.

Chi-square applied to the responses revealed many significant differences between the responses of the five age groups studied.

Age differences were found in the following areas: (1) estimates of the amount of on-going cheating, (2) opinions about which courses are cheated in most, (3) how and by whom cheaters should be punished, (4) willingness to "squeal" on cheaters, (5) cheating or giving help on tests and other tasks, (6) deceiving teachers and administrators in various ways (sometimes with the connivance of parents), and (7) the carryover of deceit from school to job, college, home, and its prevalence in contemporary society.

Studies of the concept of morality among children have shown a consistency of development in relation to increase in age (Bronfenbrenner, 1962). In the class study of deceit, by Hartshorne and May (1928), however, age was slightly negatively correlated with honesty. Social class status was involved since children of higher class status became more honest, while lower class children became less honest, as they grew older.

Gesell, Iig, and Ames (1956) asked questions of 200 adolescents of age groups 13, 14, 15, and 16, and found age difference regarding attitudes about cheating. The 13 year olds reported that few of them cheated and they disapproved of those who did. Fourteen year olds felt there wasn't much cheating in some schools but were pessimistic about other schools. Certain courses and teachers were mentioned as victims of deceitful attempts. Fifteen year olds were opposed to cheating although they admitted that some existed. Sixteen year olds, however, did confess that cheating was common, especially on examinations, and to get better marks.

The present study summarizes the responses of 1629 northeast Georgia high school students to questions requiring estimates of the amount of cheating in their school, their attitudes about dishonesty, their own projected behavior under certain circumstances, their admitted deceitful behavior, and their opinions about the carry-over of such behavior into contemporary society, and its prevalence.

**Table 1**  
*Adolescent Age Differences in Derisifal School Behavior (Ongoing)*  
*(all responses in percents)*

		13 yr. olds	14 yr. olds	15 yr. olds	16 yr. olds	17 and over		
	Choices (N=1629)	N=338	N=320	N=369	N=300	N=302	$\chi^2/df$	p
How many cheat in school?	All, always	1.5	0.9	1.1	0.7	1.0	51.33 24	.01
	All, sometimes	20.1	26.2	28.1	20.5	17.7		
	3/4 of students	15.1	17.8	19.1	24.6	26.1		
	1/2 of students	17.5	18.4	16.6	21.5	23.7		
	1/4 of students	44.4	33.7	33.0	30.3	31.1		
	none of students	1.5	2.8	2.2	2.4	0.3		
Who does more cheat- ing?	Boys (76.4)	74.3	75.3	77.9	79.3	75.5	3.031 8	ns
	Girls (23.6)	25.7	24.7	22.1	20.7	24.5		
Who does more cheat- ing?	Good students (16.6)	15.4	14.3	18.0	15.0	20.6	5.852 8	ns
	Poor students	84.6	85.7	82.0	85.0	79.4		
Where is there most cheating?	Elem. School (18.7)	34.9	26.3	13.9	11.4	6.0	125.99 12	.01
	High School (73.8)	56.7	68.3	80.1	79.6	84.9		
	College (7.4)	8.4	5.3	6.0	9.0	9.1		
In which course is there most cheat- ing?	Math (42.1)	45.4	40.7	41.5	44.0	38.9	67.32 36	.01
	Science (14.7)	16.9	17.6	15.0	14.1	10.1		
	History (20.5)	16.6	18.9	22.1	21.5	24.0		
	Business (1.6)	0.6	0.3	1.4	2.0	4.1		
	Ind. Arts (1.4)	1.5	2.2	0.8	1.7	1.0		
	English (11.8)	12.4	12.9	11.5	10.4	11.8		
	Foreign Lang. (5.6)	2.4	6.0	6.0	5.4	9.1		
	Home Ec. (0.4)	0.3	0.9	0.5	0.0	0.3		
	Health (1.5)	3.9	0.6	1.1	1.0	0.7		
Who should punish the cheater? (5 most fre- quent first choices)	Teacher (38.2)	30.9	28.3	40.2	42.1	50.7	86.80 20	.01
	Teacher & cheater agree (25.0)	23.1	30.8	22.9	25.4	23.2		
	Principal (12.2)	15.0	14.9	12.3	11.7	6.7		
	Parents (11.4)	18.3	13.0	12.3	7.0	5.4		
	Cheater punishes himself (5.3)	3.0	3.8	6.4	5.0	8.4		
How should cheating be punished? (5 most fre- quent first choices)	Failure in work cheated (50.3)	42.9	46.3	53.0	56.7	53.2	49.07 20	.01
	Call in parents (8.0)	10.1	9.7	9.6	6.0	4.0		
	Failure in subject for 1 grading period (7.1)	7.4	3.6	6.5	8.9	9.4		
	Probation (6.5)	6.2	5.8	9.0	4.6	6.4		
	Cheater must wear "cheater" sign (6.2)	10.1	6.5	6.5	3.9	3.3		

**Table 1 (Cont'd.)**  
*Adolescent Age Differences in Projected Deceitful School Behavior*

	Percent "Yes"					X <sup>2</sup> /df	p
	13	14	15	16	17+		
Would you report a friend seen cheating?	22.5	17.0	9.0	4.7	7.7	65.48	.01
Would you report a cheater not a friend?	33.8	30.4	14.1	8.8	12.8	102.77 4	.01
Would you turn in a \$1 bill you had found?	66.8	60.6	55.3	57.4	63.1	12.15 4	.02
Would you turn in a \$5 bill you had found?	77.8	68.8	67.7	69.1	73.9	12.06 4	.02
Would you turn in a \$10 bill you had found?	77.8	69.7	68.8	70.9	75.6	10.25 4	.05
Would you report an error in your favor?	75.3	62.4	66.8	60.7	57.8	26.56 4	.01
Would you allow others to copy your homework?	53.6	59.0	65.0	71.5	67.8	27.89 4	.01
Would you replace a book by "finding" one?	25.5	28.8	25.7	21.4	24.0	4.89 4	ns
If the only way you could pass a course was by cheating, would you do it?	35.1	40.6	46.8	50.7	45.3	18.92 4	.01

## Procedure

To determine whether or not the differences between reactions of the five age groups represented were statistically significant, chi-squares were computed. Chi-squares for each row were computed with 4 degrees of freedom, and where appropriate, combined with the final tabled value having the degrees of freedom of the sum of degrees of freedom for the rows combined as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Table 3 presents the individual row but no summation of rows.

Where summation is both meaningful and permissible (independence of responses) the percent responding for the row is given for total subjects. These combined frequencies for rows also were examined for statistical significance. No data on these analyses are given in the tables to keep them simplified; nor is further information needed since all gave p values less than .01.

## Results

The first questionnaire data gave  $p < .01$  for age differences in S's estimates of how much cheating occurred. Table 1 breaks this down for each age group. Although all age groups chose the one-fourth category most often as the number of cheaters in their school, it was particularly prominent for 13 year olds.

No significant difference in opinion by *age group* was indicated as to whom S's believed was more often guilty of deceit. *By row category* almost 80% were sure the male student was more likely to cheat and about 85% agreed that it was the poorer achiever who cheated more frequently, both highly significant. A notable divergence of opinion by age appeared when all students were asked at which school level most deceit was practiced. The highest ranking was given to the secondary school level, but 35% of the 13 year olds chose the elementary level whereas only 6% of the 17+ age group agreed. More recent reminiscences of elementary school and, as yet, inadequate experience with high school may account for this large difference of estimate of the 13 year old sampling compared with their older peers. Less than 10% of any of the age groups thought there might be more cheating in college.

Statistically significant age differences ( $p < .01$ ) were discovered in the responses recorded for the school subjects in which most deceit occurs. Again, experience, or lack of it, may have been responsible for the difference in ranking. All age groups agreed that mathematics was the area in which most cheating is attempted. History came second in frequency of choice for the four older groups, science was second for the youngest group, and history was third. Science was third for the 14, 15 and 16 year olds. High school seniors gave English third while placing science fourth. English was fourth in the judgment of the four younger age levels. Foreign languages were chosen fifth most often by the four older groups while the 13 year olds, not yet exposed to this subject, picked health fifth.

Two other areas were found to reveal statistically significant age differences in opinions. One was in S's choice of who should punish the cheater. The teacher was chosen most often for all age levels except the 14 year old group who wanted the teacher and cheater to work it out together. This idea was accepted as second in frequency of choice by all the other age levels. The 14, 15, and 16 year olds mentioned the principal as third in frequency of

choice as source of discipline. The 15 year olds gave equal preference to principal and parents for the third frequency of choice. The 13 year olds also preferred parents to the principal. The seniors, demanding more self-responsibility, wanted the cheater to punish himself as their third frequency of choice. For them the principal came fourth and parents last. The 13, 14, and 16 age groups did not trust the individual student as much as the seniors and gave this fifth.

In addition, the S's were asked how cheating should be punished. All believed failure in the task in which deceit was caught should be used. After this agreement, however, they differed by age. The remaining 13 year olds preferred calling in the parents, or, equally desirable, would force the cheater to wear a sign with the word "CHEATER" printed on it around his neck. The 13 year olds next preferences was to give a failing grade in the subject in which cheating was discovered for the grading period, and lastly, place the culprit on probation. Frequencies of choice after "failure in the work cheated on" for fourteen year olds were (1) call in the parents, (2) place the "sign" around the neck, (3) place the student on probation and, (4) give a failing mark for the grading period. The 15 year olds preferred the first two as above but the third choice was probation, while failing for the grading period, and the "sign" were equally preferred for fourth. The 16 year olds preferred, after the same first choice, failure for the grading period, calling in the parents, probation, and last, the "sign". The seniors had identical order of choice as did the juniors. Wearing a sign apparently was too undignified for persons of such high rank, and so it appeared last in their selections.

All the S's were asked what they would do in certain deceit-oriented situations. The 13 year old students had not yet learned the code of honor among students as well as had the older groups since more of them (22.5%) would not hesitate to report a friend seen cheating. Even more would turn a stranger over to the authorities.

The probability of finding money around school is fairly high in our affluent society. All the age groups were asked whether, or not, they would turn in bills, of three different denominations, they might have found. The claim of honesty is made by more than half of the members of all the groups for all denominations of money which they might find. Again, the youngest age level made the greatest affirmation of honesty. The interesting aspect was that little difference was apparent in the number who would

return a \$5 bill as compared with those who would turn in a \$10 bill. The 15 year old group, the low point of honesty for each monetary denomination, was either more honest in their responses or more dishonest in actuality. Age differences, however, were statistically significant at the .02 and .05 levels.

Another statistically significant difference between the age levels was the decline in eagerness to tell the teacher of an error made in the S's favor. Among the 13 year olds, 75.3% would do

Table 2  
Adolescent Age Differences in Admitted Deceitful School Behavior

Choices	Percent "Yes"					X <sup>2</sup> /df	p	
	13	14	15	16	17+			
1. Have you taken a cheat sheet to a test?	Frequently	2.1	3.7	5.4	3.7	11.6	99.21 12	.01
	Sometimes	22.6	33.4	41.3	45.8	44.8		
	Never	75.3	62.8	53.3	50.5	43.7		
2. Have you used a cheat sheet taken to a test?	Frequently	2.4	3.8	5.2	3.4	12.5	98.81 12	.01
	Sometimes	17.5	21.6	32.9	36.7	35.8		
	Never	80.1	74.6	61.9	59.9	51.6		
3. Have you turned in work done by another student?	Frequently	3.9	8.9	7.3	3.4	10.9	24.97 12	.02
	Sometimes	42.1	47.5	43.4	48.0	39.6		
	Never	54.0	45.6	49.3	48.7	49.5		
4. Have you turned in work done by your parents?	Frequently	0.9	4.1	1.1	1.3	4.2	36.08 12	.01
	Sometimes	24.1	16.4	17.4	15.7	10.6		
	Never	75.0	79.6	81.5	82.9	85.3		
5. Have you copied a report <i>verbatim</i> from the encyclopedia?	Frequently	19.5	19.2	17.3	15.3	16.3	22.81 12	.05
	Sometimes	50.6	47.8	53.3	51.0	39.6		
	Never	29.9	33.0	29.4	33.7	44.1		
6. Have you given help on a test?	Frequently	10.4	14.2	17.7	18.5	31.3	85.33 12	.01
	Sometimes	58.2	57.5	66.3	65.4	51.4		
	Never	31.5	28.3	16.0	16.1	17.3		
7. Have you lied to your parents about school?	Frequently	7.4	7.8	6.5	9.7	12.0	16.67 12	na
	Sometimes	47.9	45.0	50.8	45.5	38.2		
	Never	44.7	47.2	42.7	40.8	49.8		
8. Have you signed your parents name to excuse?	Frequently	1.8	4.7	6.2	6.4	12.0	40.23 12	.01
	Sometimes	15.4	16.2	20.1	21.5	21.5		
	Never	82.8	79.1	73.7	72.1	66.5		
9. Have your parents given you untruthful excuses?	Frequently	1.8	2.2	1.4	2.0	3.7	28.29 12	.01
	Sometimes	15.1	17.8	19.1	22.2	29.0		
	Never	83.1	80.0	79.6	75.8	67.3		
10. Have you signed your teacher's name to anything?	Frequently	0.6	2.2	1.9	0.3	1.3	23.94 12	.05
	Sometimes	1.8	5.3	7.9	4.4	3.3		
	Never	97.6	92.5	90.2	95.3	95.3		

Table 2 (Cont'd.)

	Choices	13	14	15	16	17+	$\chi^2/df$	p
11. Have you pretended illness to miss school?	Frequently	4.5	6.3	5.4	6.7	7.0	41.95	.01
	Sometimes	34.8	34.8	41.6	42.3	35.0		
	Never	60.7	58.9	33.0	51.0	57.0		
12. Have you taken books out of the library without having them checked?	Frequently	0.6	0.3	0.8	0.7	1.3	17.13	ns
	Sometimes	12.4	7.2	8.2	5.7	5.3		
	Never	87.0	92.5	91.0	93.7	93.4		
13. Have you found anything valuable at school but did not report it?	Frequently	2.1	1.6	1.6	2.3	2.0	40.60	.01
	Sometimes	15.7	18.9	12.5	8.0	4.3		
	Never	82.2	79.6	85.9	89.6	93.7		
14. When correcting a student's work have you graded it higher than it deserved?	Frequently	1.8	3.8	2.2	3.3	2.0	11.88	ns
	Sometimes	18.3	20.1	24.1	20.1	15.9		
	Never	79.9	76.1	73.7	76.6	82.1		
15. Compared with last year are you now having to cheat?	More	4.2	3.8	6.6	8.1	8.4	34.86	.01
	Less	24.9	23.9	27.3	23.6	15.7		
	Same	14.5	18.5	21.8	15.8	16.7		
	None	56.4	53.8	44.2	52.5	59.2		
16. In which grade did you begin cheating?	1 (21.8)	17.2	19.7	22.6	25.1	25.3	245.13	.01
	2 ( 6.4)	7.4	8.4	6.5	4.7	4.7		
	3 ( 1.5)	3.3	2.2	1.1	0.3	0.7		
	4 ( 3.2)	5.0	3.7	3.3	1.3	2.3		
	5 ( 6.1)	8.9	6.9	5.4	4.0	5.0		
	6 (10.4)	15.1	10.0	8.7	8.7	9.7		
	7 (10.9)	17.2	14.4	7.1	10.0	6.0		
	8 (16.1)	18.9	16.9	18.5	14.7	10.7		
	9 (11.5)	7.1	14.1	13.0	13.7	10.0		
	10 ( 7.5)	0	3.7	11.4	9.0	13.7		
	11 ( 3.1)	0	0	2.4	7.0	7.0		
	12 ( 1.0)	0	0	0	1.3	4.3		
	Never (0.1)	0	0	0	0	0.7		

this while 57.8% of the 17+ group would, also. The 13 year olds, however, were least prone to allow others to copy their homework. The 16 year olds were most agreeable to this practice. The 13 year olds again, would be least susceptible to the temptation of cheating to pass a course when there was no other way left for them to get through. Only 35% of them would try it, whereas, 51% of the 16 year old group would.

Table 2 shows that the age differences were significant factors in the responses gathered to questions requiring the admission or denial of certain common deceitful practices in school. The oldest group of students admitted taking "cheat sheets" into examinations more frequently than any of the others. The 13 year olds affirmed such behavior least often. The same was true in their responses concerning the actual use of such illegal aids. However, in the confession that they had turned in work done by another, the 14 year old group was highest, and the 13 year olds were, again, lowest.

In regard to submitting work done by their parents, 25% of the 13 year olds admitted they had, while only 15% of the seniors admitted this. Copying a report verbatim from some original source and then giving it to the teacher as their own was admitted most often by the youngest group (70%) and least by the oldest group (50%). Giving help to others during examinations was most common among the oldest students (83%), but least common (68%) in the 13 year olds.

Lying to parents about school was most noticeable (60%) among the 16 year olds while their senior peers did so least (50%) often of all five age groups. Again, the youngest level of students confessed to forging their parents' names to school excuses least often (17%) while the members of the oldest group said they did it most (33%). A difference of 1% appeared in both of these percentages in their confessions to the cooperation of the parents in their children's dishonesty in giving them false excuses to be turned in to school authorities. Although not more than 10% admitted ever having signed a teacher's name to anything, the 15 year old group was most prominent in this activity while their 13 year old peers were least prone to try it. Significant difference for age was revealed when it came to pretending illness to skip school. The 16 year old level (49%) used this technique more than anyone else. Again, the 13 year old level was lowest, guilty in 40% of the cases. Differences for ages increased significantly for keeping lost articles found at school.

Age differences were not statistically significant in a situation in which some students are placed; namely that of correcting work done by others. When asked whether they ever gave each other higher marks than were deserved, 80% denied such nefarious conduct.

There was, again, statistical significance regarding the comparisons with the previous year's deceit. The seniors confessed they

Table 3  
Age Differences in Adolescents' Attitudes Concerning Deceit

Statement	Percent Accepting					X <sup>2</sup> /df	p
	13	14	15	16	17+		
1. A cheater in school will cheat later on the job	79.9	73.4	70.7	64.0	70.1	20.88 4	.01
2. It is necessary to be dishonest at times	26.6	37.5	33.1	33.3	38.9	13.31 4	.01
3. Breaking a law is being dishonest	84.3	80.9	82.1	81.7	78.4	3.78 4	ns
4. Cheating to get into college will result in failure in college	70.3	64.4	69.1	63.7	59.5	11.03 4	.05
5. Cheating hurts only the cheater	85.5	77.7	82.9	83.7	76.7	12.22 4	.02
6. A school cheater will cheat at home	54.1	48.7	45.5	36.7	39.2	26.04 4	.01
7. Cheating is a sin	69.8	69.1	68.0	64.7	61.5	6.70 4	ns
8. Honesty is always the best policy	85.2	79.1	87.5	82.3	75.7	19.69 4	.01
9. Adults are more dishonest than children	26.0	31.3	28.7	29.3	33.6	4.76 4	ns
10. Crime does not pay	89.3	87.8	89.7	90.0	86.0	3.29 4	ns
11. Some dishonesty is necessary for success in business	26.0	38.1	37.1	33.7	27.2	18.81 4	.01
12. Cheating is always discovered	86.1	83.4	84.3	83.0	77.7	8.51 4	ns
13. Most advertising is dishonest	48.8	46.6	47.2	46.0	37.5	10.05 4	.05
14. Some teachers are dishonest	54.7	59.1	59.3	58.3	53.5	3.70 4	ns
15. Dishonest parents have dishonest children	42.3	37.8	33.1	37.3	25.2	23.14 4	.01

Statement	13	14	15	16	17+	X <sup>2</sup> /df	p
16. Cheaters can't be trusted	73.1	61.2	64.2	59.3	45.5	53.68 4	.01
17. Girls are more honest	38.2	45.0	41.2	36.0	41.9	6.35 4	ns
18. Boys are more honest	23.1	20.9	24.4	19.3	15.9	8.81 4	ns
19. Cheating may help learning	11.5	15.0	20.9	15.3	20.9	15.89 4	.01
20. More cheat under male teachers	23.7	28.1	29.5	26.7	28.9	3.68 4	ns
21. More cheat under female teachers	54.7	53.4	51.8	50.3	45.2	7.07 4	ns

(8.4%) were doing more cheating twice as often as did the 13 year olds (4.2%). The 15 year old group was most certain (27.3%) of this need for less cheating this year, as well as highest (21.8%) in the same amount as the previous year. The oldest students (60%) claimed they now were not cheating at all. This was a higher figure than for any of the others.

All the students were asked when they remembered having started, if at all, cheating in school. Although the first grade received the largest single vote as the origin of cheating, grades six, seven, eight, and nine, when added together, produced the period of school experience in which the subjects admitted, most often, their beginning in cheating activities. Yet age differences were apparent in their reports and statistical significance was calculated to be below the .01 level. Much of the age difference probably is related to response bias rather than actual age of onset.

The last section of the survey asked all the adolescents to accept or reject statements which would evoke their attitudes about the possible carryover of deceit, and its prevalence in contemporary society. Results appear in Table 3. All age groups largely agreed upon the following: breaking a law is being dishonest; cheating is a sin; children are more dishonest than adults; crime does not pay; cheating is always discovered; some teachers are dishonest; boys are less honest than girls, and more cheat under female teachers.

There were significant differences of opinion, at the .01 level of confidence, in responses to the following: a cheater in school will cheat later on the job (80% of the 13 year olds accepted this while 64% of the 16 year olds did also); it is not necessary to be dishonest at any time (74% of the 13 year olds and 61% of the 17+ age group agreed); a cheater in school will cheat at home (54% of the 13 year olds and 39% of the 17+ group agreed with this); honesty is always the best policy (88% of the 15 year olds, 76% of the 17+ age group accepted this); some dishonesty is necessary for success in business (26% of the 13 year olds and 38% of the 14 year olds accepted this statement); dishonest parents have dishonest children (42% of the 13 year olds, and 25% of the 17 year olds accepted this idea); cheaters can't be trusted (73% of the 13 year olds, 46% of the 17+ group agreed); cheating may help learning (12% of the 13 year olds, 21% of the 17+ group agreed).

At the .05 level of confidence, statistical significance of the differences of opinion was reached on the following: cheating

to get into college will result in failure in college (70% of the 13 year olds, 60% of the 17+ group agreed); cheating hurts only the cheater (86% of the 13 year olds, 77% of the 17+ group accepted this idea); most advertising is dishonest (49% of the 13 year olds, 37% of the 17+ group agreed to this statement).

### Conclusions

Thus, it can be said that differences in age among the adolescents samples produced statistically significant differences in their responses to the questions posed to them. Differences were found in (1) estimates of on-going cheating (2) opinions about the high school courses in which deceit appears most frequently, (3) how and by whom cheaters should be punished, (4) willingness to "squeal" on cheaters, (5) returning valuables found in school, (6) cheating and giving help on tests and homework, (7) deceiving teachers and school authorities (sometimes with the connivance of parents), (8) and beliefs about the carryover of deceit from school to the job, college, home and its prevalence in other aspects of contemporary life.

It appears that significant differences exist most often between the youngest and oldest of the five age groups studied. The former seem to be more unsophisticated and, perhaps, not yet disillusioned about their peers' behavior in school and the world about them. The latter have experienced and already learned the harder facts of life. The older groups who appreciate the need for success, and fear the results of failure more than their younger companions admit to more cheating.

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