

# FOUNDATIONS *of* DEMOCRACY

**AUTHORITY   PRIVACY   RESPONSIBILITY   JUSTICE**

**MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT LESSON**

**HOW SHOULD ONE CHOOSE AMONG COMPETING RESPONSIBILITIES, VALUES, AND INTERESTS?**



© 1993, 2005 Center for Civic Education  
11 10 09 12 13 14

**COPY FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY  
REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED WITHOUT PRIOR WRITTEN PERMISSION**

This lesson was excerpted from *Foundations of Democracy*, © 2005,  
Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, CA, [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)

All rights reserved.

Except for use in a review, reproduction or transmittal  
of this work in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means,  
now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, and  
use of this work in any form in any information storage and retrieval system  
is forbidden without prior written permission of the publisher.

The first edition of this text was developed with the  
support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.  
This new and revised edition has been prepared under Grant #85-JS-CX-0009  
from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice  
Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this  
document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the  
official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Cover photograph  
© 2000 Eyewire, Inc/  
Visions of America, LLC

ISBN 10 0-89818-150-X  
ISBN 13 978-0-89818-150-0

# Responsibility

SAMPLE LESSON - MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

## Student Lesson

# How Should One Choose Among Competing Responsibilities, Values and Interests?

### Purpose of Lesson

This lesson introduces you to the concept of responsibility and its importance in everyday life. You will examine common sources of responsibility, and whether the responsibilities are freely chosen, imposed by others or assumed unconsciously.

You will examine situations in which people must make a decision among competing responsibilities, values and interests.

### What is responsibility?

A responsibility is a duty or obligation to do something or not to do something. For example, you may have a responsibility to help take care of younger brothers or sisters, to finish your homework before going out with friends, or not to use your parents' tools without their permission. Usually, there are rewards or benefits that come from fulfilling responsibilities. If you fail to fulfill a responsibility, a penalty or punishment may be imposed. For example, you may receive an allowance if you perform your chores at home, and you may be punished if you fail to perform your chores. As you can see, different consequences result from fulfilling and from not fulfilling responsibilities.

### Terms to Know

responsibility	obligations
values	reward
contract	interests
penalty	consent
bill	assignment
constituents	appointment
source	occupation
custom	civic duty
moral principles	conscious choice

### Critical Thinking Exercise No. 1

#### EXAMINING RESPONSIBILITIES

Each of the following situations involves an issue of responsibility. As you read each situation, think about what you would have done if you had been involved. Decide whether or not you would have had a responsibility and, if so, how you could have fulfilled that responsibility. Then answer the "What do you think?" questions.

- 1 It was late at night in the city. Most people had finished dinner and gone to bed. Suddenly, a woman's voice was clearly heard pleading, "No! Let me alone!" Lights went on in windows, and people appeared looking down on the struggle in the street. A man holding a knife was trying to steal a young woman's purse. "Leave her alone!" someone shouted. The robber looked up to see if anyone was coming, and the woman struggled to get free. The neighbors continued to look down as if they were watching television. Seeing that no one was coming to stop him, the robber stabbed the woman and fled with her purse. The wounded woman fell to the ground, bleeding.



- 2 Mrs. Thompson didn't know what to do. There had been several burglaries in the neighborhood, and she thought she knew who had committed them. Just yesterday, her son and several of his friends had been watching television at her home. Bob, one of the friends, had been showing off a portable stereo he said someone had given to him. Mrs. Thompson recognized the portable stereo. It belonged to one of her neighbors whose home had been burglarized.
- 3 Representative Sanchez had to decide how he would vote on a bill—a proposed law. The bill would require factories in his district to control air and water pollution. The factory owners would have to spend large amounts of money to do so. This could mean the loss of jobs for some of his constituents, the people he represents. They did not want him to support the bill. But other people in his district favored the bill. They would be angry if he voted against it. How he votes could cost him the next election.

### What do you think?

- 1 Who has responsibilities in the situation?
- 2 What are those responsibilities?
- 3 To whom are the responsibilities owed?
- 4 Where did the responsibilities come from?
- 5 What might happen if the person or persons fulfilled the responsibilities? If the person failed to fulfill them?

### Why is Responsibility Important?

In examining and making decisions about a specific responsibility, we need to talk about why it is important for people to fulfill their responsibilities. We also need to know something about the source of responsibility—where it comes from. In the next section we will examine some common sources of responsibility.

### Sources of Responsibility

Responsibilities come from a number of sources. The following examples illustrate some common ways people get responsibilities.

- **Promises:** When an individual makes a promise to another, that person takes on the responsibility or obligation of keeping the promises or “living up to his or her word.” Sometimes promises people make to each other are in the form of legal agreements called “contracts.” At other times, promises are very informal. You should recognize that when you make a promise, you consent or agree to fulfill a responsibility or obligation.
- Bob borrowed \$50 from his friend Clifford to pay for his car repair. He promised to pay Clifford back when he got paid at the end of the week.



- Mr. and Mrs. Meyer signed a lease agreement with the landlord to rent the apartment for a year.
- **Assignments:** Sometimes people **assign** or impose responsibilities on other people.
- Mr. Smith assigned his English class the task



of reading the first half of the novel by Friday.

- The school principal assigned the responsibility of keeping order in the lunch room to Mrs. Rodriguez, the sixth-grade teacher.
- **Appointment:** In some situations, people may be chosen or appointed to positions that carry responsibilities.
- Governor McHugh appointed Wanda Chin



to be a justice of the state supreme court.

- Coach Castaneda appointed Paul Stockton to be equipment manager for the team.
- **Occupation:** Each occupation or job carries certain responsibilities.
- As an automobile repair mechanic, Helen Reed is expected to do a good job fixing cars.
- Judge Hastings is responsible for conducting trials fairly, instructing juries properly, and sentencing criminals according to law.
- **Law:** Laws place responsibilities on almost everyone in society.
- Juan Herrera is required to go to school until he is 16 years old or until he graduates from high school.
- Part of Jeannette Baker's pay is deducted from her paycheck each week to pay her taxes, as provided by the Federal Tax Code.

- **Custom:** Some responsibilities come from customs—traditions or standard practices that develop over time, which people in society are expected to follow.
- Joe Wilson stands in line and waits patiently for his turn.
- Loretta Stern brings a gift to her friend's birthday party.



- **Citizenship:** In our country, people have certain responsibilities just because they are citizens.
- Sheri Ricco votes in the election because it is her civic duty – an obligation of citizenship.



- Carlos Jimenez keeps informed about important issues.

- **Moral Principles:** Moral principles are rules or standards of conduct based on principles of right and wrong.
  - Everyone should treat others with respect.
  - Everyone should be fair to others.

## Critical Thinking Exercise No. 2

### EXAMINING RESPONSIBILITIES

Work with a study partner. Answer the following questions. Be prepared to discuss your answers with your class.

- Identify a responsibility you have that comes from each of the following sources:
  - promises
  - assignments
  - appointments
  - occupation
  - laws
  - custom
  - citizenship
  - moral principles
- Of the responsibilities you identified:
  - Which ones did you take on freely or voluntarily?
  - Which were you required to assume?
  - Which did you take on without conscious choice – that is, without thinking about them?
- Of the responsibilities you identified, which two do you think are most important? Why?
- What rewards might you receive for fulfilling each of these two most important responsibilities? What penalties might you pay for failing to fulfill them?

- What is the importance of fulfilling these two responsibilities? What might happen if people did not fulfill such responsibilities?

### What Kinds of Conflicts May Arise in Fulfilling Responsibilities?

There are two common types of conflicts that can arise when we have to make choices about fulfilling responsibilities.

- 1 In some situations, two responsibilities are in conflict and there may not be a way to fulfill both of them, at least not at the same time.
- 2 In other situations, there is a conflict among responsibilities and other values and interests.

In the following critical thinking exercise you will examine each of these types of situations. But first, we will define the terms **values** and **interests**.

- A **value** is something that you think is worthwhile and important, something that is right or good, that you ought to try to achieve. For example, fairness is a value. So are qualities such as kindness and courage. Other values include honesty, loyalty, friendship, privacy, freedom, and justice.
- An **interest** is something you want or that you are concerned about, such as free time, good health, or rewards of one kind or another.



Sometimes, if you decide to fulfill a responsibility, you might have to sacrifice one or more of your other values or interests. At another time, you might decide not to fulfill a responsibility because some other value or interest is more important to you.

### Critical Thinking Exercise No. 3

#### EXAMINING COMPETING RESPONSIBILITIES, VALUES, AND INTERESTS

Read the following stories and then answer the questions that follow.

- Last week, Gwen's teacher gave the class a homework assignment due the following Friday. Gwen put off the assignment until the day before it was due. She had to use the library and it would take her most of the afternoon and evening to finish her assignment. On Thursday morning, the basketball coach announced a practice after school. Gwen was not sure what to do. She was the captain of the team and they were counting on her to lead the practice.

- Roger was permitted to use his mother's car to get to and from band practice, but he was not allowed to drive his friends anywhere. On Friday night, his best friend was stranded after practice because he had lost his bus money. It was late and the buses ran infrequently. Roger called home to ask his mom to make an exception just this one time. There was no answer.

#### Identify Competing Responsibilities, Values, and Interests

- 1 What responsibilities are Gwen and Roger thinking of fulfilling in each situation?
- 2 What responsibilities are in conflict in these situations? What values and interests are in conflict?
- 3 **What do you think?** What would you decide to do? Why?





### Using the Lesson

- 1 Make a chart of the responsibilities you have at home, school, and in your community. The chart should show to whom the responsibility is owed, the source of the responsibility, and any rewards or penalties associated with it.
- 2 Collect illustrations of responsibility from magazines and newspapers. Use the clippings to create a bulletin board or hallway display.
- 3 List one or two of the most important responsibilities other people have toward you. Then answer the following questions for each of the responsibilities:
  - What is the source of the person's responsibility to you?
  - Did the person who has the responsibility assume it voluntarily? Was it imposed on the person? Did the person assume it without conscious thought?
  - What rewards might the person receive for fulfilling his or her responsibility to you?
  - What penalties might the person pay for failing to fulfill his or her responsibility to you?
  - What is the importance of fulfilling the responsibility? What might happen if people did not fulfill such responsibilities?
- 4 Draw a picture or make a collage to illustrate one of the responsibilities you have and show its source.
- 5 Write a story or draw a picture describing a situation in which a person is faced with competing responsibilities. Explain what the person decides to do and why.
- 6 Conduct research to learn about one of the following situations in which a person faced competing responsibilities, values, and interests.
  - Muhammed Ali was the first boxer to win the World Boxing Association heavyweight championship three times. During the Vietnam War, he was drafted to serve in the army. He claimed he opposed war on moral grounds and refused to serve.
  - In 1859, John Brown, a northerner who hated slavery, went to Virginia planning to lead the slaves to freedom. He and his men seized a government weapons storehouse and several people were killed.
  - Near the end of World War II, scientists in the United States developed the atomic bomb. As commander-in-chief, President Truman had to decide whether or not to use the bomb to try to force Japan to surrender.
- 7 Present a report to the class. Describe the situation, explain the competing responsibilities, values, and interests. State what decision was made, and explain why you agree or disagree with the decision.