

Making Ethical Decisions: Discussions for Children and Caregivers

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Professor of Computer Information Systems
Norwich University

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1 Chapter 1: Mistakes in the Digital Age

Sometimes people do things that they don't realize are wrong. They may feel sorry about what they did later or when they grow up. Sometimes they are punished for their actions.

When using computers, it can be easy to make mistakes. We can copy programs, music or movies without permission; that's called theft of intellectual property. Intellectual property is anything that a person or an organization creates; it can include artwork, literature, theater, movies, inventions, and even special symbols called *trademarks*. When you write a story, it becomes your intellectual property.

Intellectual property protection includes *copyright*, *trademarks*, and *patents*. Copyright laws protect what we write, draw, compose, and perform. Trademarks protect special symbols that identify an organization or a product. Patents protect the work of inventors. Intellectual property can be sold; some people earn a living by being paid for their creation of intellectual property. Intellectual property can be sold; some people earn a living by being paid for their creation of intellectual property.

Other kinds of mistakes include sending out messages about other people that have incorrect information. Some people use Internet services such as messaging or posting comments to bully other people. Often these messages and comments are used without the real names of the people doing these things. Using a fake name is called *pseudonymity*. Using no name is called *anonymity*.

Sometimes people use other people's computers without permission; this kind of invasion is called *hacking*. In the USA, breaking into other people's computers is a federal crime because it violates the Computer Fraud & Abuse Act of 1986, often known as 18 USC 1030(a). "USC" means United States Code and 1030(a) is the section of that law that covers breaking into someone else's computer.¹

Some people flood computers with huge numbers of messages; the floods can prevent the target from responding normally to ordinary requests. For example, sending thousands of messages per second to a website can make the website crash. These floods are known as *denial-of-service* (DoS) attacks.

Sometimes people create programs that can hurt computers; these programs are known as *malware*. Malware includes *viruses* that make copies of themselves by taking over programs that are *infected*. Bad programs that copy themselves without inserting their code into other programs are known as *worms*. Other kinds of bad programs make information on the target machine unreadable unless the victim pays money to

¹ (Legal Information Institute, 1986)

get the *decryption key* from the criminals. These encryption programs are known as *ransomware*.

Some malware lets infected computers be turned into *zombies* or *bots* (from the word *robot*) that are under the control of *master* programs; these collections of infected computers are known as *botnets*. Botnets make it easy to harm computers by sending floods of information from all the zombies to the targets; these are distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks.

In the USA, there are many laws that make all of these attacks illegal.²

All of these mistakes can lead to serious problems, which are discussed in the next chapters of this book.

1.1 Questions & Exercises:

- Write down a list of some of what you personally have written, drawn, sculpted or performed; they are your intellectual property.
- Create a list of intellectual property that you and your family have bought; examples could include computers, DVDs, CDs, artwork and so on. Include trademarks on your favorite foods and other products.
- Now list some of the copyrighted products you and your family have obtained and kept without having to pay for them; examples could include music and movies recorded from your computer without getting anyone's permission.
- Describe cases you know about where people have used fake names or no names to spread wrong information. Include cases where people have been bullied that way.
- List cases you have read about or seen on TV or in movies that involve the kinds of computer crime discussed in this section. Write about how you felt about these cases when you learned of them.

² (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018)

2 Chapter 2: Deciding What's Right³

Ethics refers to doing what's right.

Life is full of *ethical decisions*, and using computer technology and networking is no different. Kids, parents and teachers are constantly facing decisions about whether it's right or wrong to act in alternative ways. One of the problems we face is that very few people can explain how they come to make an ethical decision. Some people seem to think that ethical decisions are at about the same level of reasoning as their preference for a particular flavor of ice-cream. They'll say, "I like strawberry; you like pistachio — and who's to say if it's right or wrong?"

It's not quite as harmless when the question is whether to break into a system or not, or whether to spread lies on the Internet about someone who's offended you.

It's helpful to know how other people have learned how to make ethical decisions. That way you can see if their ways of thinking about how to act can be useful to you.

This section doesn't give you any guidelines on what your decisions should be; it's just looking at how people decide such questions.

The basic idea about making ethical decisions is that there's a series of questions you can ask yourself. For example, we've seen that sometimes there are laws about what you can do and what you can't do legally. That's probably the first thing you have to find out when you're thinking about something. Is it legal or not? Although there are exceptions, in general you shouldn't break the law to attain your ends. Try to think of other ways of reaching your goal — or see if you can get the law changed! In countries where democracy rules, you can sometimes get laws changed by convincing a lot of people that your approach is better than what we have now.

Next, you have to realize that there are lots of other ways that people guide their behavior. For instance, there are rules, customs, expectations, habits — all kinds of guides to behavior. These guidelines vary from country to country and even within countries. There are guidelines for doctors and guidelines for automobile mechanics; for teachers and for students; for grocery-store clerks and police officers. Religious communities have rules, too, and you'll want to think about whether your own beliefs and your family's heritage can help you decide what to do.

You can ask whether there are any written rules that you ought to think about when deciding what to do. In a club, for example, maybe there are policies that everyone agrees to follow. Or when you use an Internet service provider (ISP), there's usually a code of conduct or terms of service that tell you what you're allowed to do and what's forbidden — sending unwanted email to sell things (what we call *spam*), for example, is forbidden by most ISPs. Your school has rules on how you are supposed to use school computers, including perhaps limits on what kinds of Web sites you are supposed to visit. Some families even write down their own, normally

³ (Kabay, 2004)

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unwritten, rules so that everyone can agree on exactly what they can do with the family computer(s).

In many places around the world, people shape their actions by thinking about the *Golden Rule*: to imagine themselves in another's place and see if they'd like to have a particular action done to themselves just like they're thinking of doing it to others.

2.1 Questions & Exercises:

1. There are some easy questions you can ask yourself. For example,
 - Does the idea feel wrong?
 - Would you tell your parents what you're planning or what you did?
 - Would you like to have your action shown on national TV?
 - Would you be proud of yourself in public for having done what you're thinking about?
2. Another kind of question is about who wins and who loses in each of the choices you make.
 - Would your action hurt others?
 - Would you violate their privacy?
 - Would you take their property?
 - Would you make others pay for your own (usually secret) benefit?
3. Then there are principles — baseline rules that we grow to accept as guides for our behavior and for judging other people's behavior. For example,
 - Would a proposed action break someone's trust in you?
 - Would it hurt someone's feelings?
 - Would it be unjust or unfair?
 - Would it involve untruths?
4. On the other side,
 - Would what you're thinking about make you a better person?
 - Would it make you kinder?
 - Would it make you smarter?
 - Would it make you proud of your integrity?
5. What about respect?
 - Does your idea show respect for other people?
 - Or does it treat them as tools for your own gain?
 - Would you feel "used" if someone did what you are thinking about to you?

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6. And what if everyone acted as you suggest — would that be good or bad in general? It's like walking across the grass in a pretty garden instead of taking a couple of extra steps to stay on the path: if you're the only one doing it, it may not hurt the grass. But if everyone did it, soon there'd be a muddy path across the corner instead of the grass. This principle is known as the *categorical imperative*.

3 Chapter 3: Excuses⁴

A lot of material available on the Web or through other parts of the Internet is *copyrighted* by the people who made it or who paid for it. Examples include movies, music, books, articles, and drawings. These creations are known as *intellectual property*. The people who own the copyright are permitted to give their creations away for free if they want or to keep control of them and charge people for them if they prefer. Using copyrighted materials without permission is known as *intellectual-property theft* or *copyright violation*. There can be serious punishments for such actions.

Sometimes you'll meet someone who argues that their bad behavior on the Internet is OK. Some of their favorite excuses are discussed here.

Everyone's doing it.

Response: So what? That doesn't make it right or legal. Unethical behavior is not excused by popularity. If it's wrong or bad, it's wrong or bad regardless of how many people go along. Just because there are lots of bad people doing bad things doesn't give you a license to do whatever suits you.

We won't get caught.

Response: So what? Being caught has no bearing on whether the act is moral or legal. Doing bad things gets to be a habit regardless of whether anyone finds out about it.

It's the {software, music, game, movie} company's fault: if they don't want theft, they should charge less.

First of all, even *shareware* authors who just ask for contributions for their freely available programs get cheated by people who use their software without paying for it – and these are packages for which the authors ask for only a few dollars.

Secondly, the owner of the software/music/game/movie has no obligation to meet someone else's view of appropriate pricing.

Thirdly, no one has a right or entitlement to use the fruits of other people's hard work for free unless they're given permission; if you don't like the price, find a more cost-effective alternative or write it/compose it/create it/play it/film it yourself.

But I need it and I don't want to pay for it.

How does that justify theft? Would it be OK to rob a bank tomorrow to buy a car? Or why not just mug someone so you can have their jacket? What nice tools there are

⁴ (Kabay, Seven Reasons NOT to Steal Software, Music, Games or Movies, 2010)

at the hardware store – I'll just steal some. Wouldn't it be great to own (um, well, not exactly own) that laptop computer?

It doesn't hurt anyone.

Yes it does. All the people who try to earn a living from making, distributing and selling intellectual property suffer from having half to seven-eighths of their potential sales eliminated through theft. How would you like it if you were trying to earn a living providing a service or a tool – and half the potential clients simply stole your product without paying you anything at all?

It only hurts a company – I wouldn't steal it from an individual.

Oh, Robin Hood, eh? The company isn't a machine, it's a group of people who agree to work together according to terms they agree on. Steal from the company and you steal from employees, owners and other stakeholders. You may even hurt honest users by contributing to higher prices. Where's the line you're drawing? Would you steal from a corner store owned by Mom and Pop? How about it they had one employee? three? fifteen?

No software/music/game/movie should ever be copyrighted--it should always be free.

Response: Do your parents earn a salary or would you like to? Why not donate your time instead? How about cutting all your neighbors' lawns for free, taking out their garbage every week, and washing all their cars – without payment? Forever?

Did you pay for your computer? But why? Why not decide that computer hardware shouldn't be patented – it should be always be free?

Why shouldn't cars be free? Skateboards? Restaurants? Everything?

3.1 Questions & Exercises

1. Suppose you worked on a school project and someone else in your class took it and claimed it was theirs. How would you feel about that? What would you say to them?
2. Think about a grownup you know who earns money for their work. Ask them how they would feel if they did their work but did not get paid for it? Ask them what they think about using copyrighted materials without permission.

4 Chapter 4: Discussions with Your Parents & Teachers⁵

Talking about ethics with your parents and teachers is really useful. Here are some questions you can have fun discussing.

4.1 Respect for intellectual property rights

1. Are all the programs, games, music, and videos on your computers, game consoles, music players, and mobile phones either paid for or legally free? If not, how did you get involved in copying such materials without paying for them?
2. Where did the contents of your report / project / homework come from – does any of it belong to someone else, such as another student, a paper you downloaded from the Web, or something you found on a Web page?
3. If you copied text and images from another source, did you have permission to use them? If you didn't need permission from the "owners" of the information you're using, did you credit them for the material?
4. Have you or your friends ever considered buying term papers from a store on the Web? Tell us about that.

4.2 Respect for other people's property rights

5. Do you ever use other people's computer, disk-space or processing capability, or look at or copy their files or information, without their knowledge or permission? How? Why?
6. Have you or friends of yours ever signed on to (i.e., hacked into) computers that belong to companies or government agencies without permission? When did you start? How many times have you done that?
7. Have you ever changed anything on someone else's computer – for instance, left a funny picture or a joke, or removed content such as homework or some other file? Tell us about that. Where did you learn to do that kind of thing?
8. Do you have any prank programs, computer viruses, worms, Trojan horse programs, bombs, or other malicious software on your computer? What do you do with this material? Why?

4.3 Respect for social values

9. Do you have any computer graphics files, clips, movies, animations or drawings that you would be embarrassed about? Why do you have them? Did you get them legitimately?

⁵ (Kabay, Questions about Ethical Computer & Network Usage for Parents to Discuss With Their Children, 2010)

10. Are all your files things you would be comfortable showing me? Showing your grandparents / friends / teachers? Why or why not?
11. Do you have any pictures, video clips, sound clips, articles, text, or other software or files which contain pornography, violence, dangerous instructions other distasteful material? Do you access or view any of these kinds of things when using the Internet?
12. Are you aware that making, owning and distributing child pornography – images of kids engaged in sexual acts – are federal crimes? Has anyone ever showed you child pornography? How did you respond?
13. Do you have any newsletters, plans, guidelines, or “how-to” documents or files about violence or criminality that you would not be comfortable showing to your parents? For instance, making bombs, breaking into systems, stealing telephone access, stealing computer access, stealing passwords, violent text, guides, or descriptions? Do any of your friends create, contribute to or receive anything like this? Do you? Why?

4.4 Questions related to network use

14. Do you ever connect your computer to a telephone, use a modem, or otherwise use a network? If so, consider the following questions:
15. With whom do you associate when you use the Internet? Tell me about your contacts.
16. Do you ever use an assumed name, a handle, or an alias instead of your real name? Where and why?
17. Do you supply false information about yourself when using a bulletin board, a news group, a message group or forum, a social-networking site, instant messaging, Twitter or any other aspect of the Internet? Why?
18. Do you give your real age, sex, and address to strangers you have met online using your computer? Has anyone ever talked to you about Internet safety when meeting strangers online? What do you know?
19. Do you use any false information such as a fake addresses or phone numbers or use someone else’s credit card number when using your computer? Do you ever send messages or e-mail in such a way that the recipient cannot tell that you sent it? Have you ever modified data, text, messages, or other computer information so that it looks like someone other than you created it or made the changes? Who told you about doing such things? How long have you been doing them? Have you stolen money
20. Do you use telephone, video, cable-TV, computer network, bulletin board, or other chargeable network services without paying for them?

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