



THE VIRTUE OF GOOD SENSE

"Wisdom is found only in truth."

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

OVERVIEW

Students define and practice "good sense," or the will and know-how to do the right thing.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When students are facing a moral dilemma, either in their immediate lives or in the world
- As a follow-up to the practice "What is a Flourishing Life"
- Anytime during the school year, but especially at the beginning of the year to teach students a process for making morally thoughtful decisions

TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Days

LEVEL

- High School

MATERIALS

- Handout of "What Gets in the Way of Good Sense?"
- Handout of "How to Practice Good Sense"
- Writing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand the term “good sense”
- Practice applying “good sense” to a range of situations

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- “Good sense” means having the will and know-how to do the right thing, usually in moral situations. Other terms for “good sense” include the scientific term “practical wisdom” and the ancient Greek term “phronesis.”
- The virtue of “good sense” forms part of every other virtue. It molds, informs, and transforms our basic desires, emotions, instincts, and impulses into morally good decisions. It is a moral compass that steers us towards the more virtuous decisions and away from the less virtuous ones. It takes a lifetime of practice, experience, and reflection to calibrate this compass correctly.
- Can you think of a time when you or someone you know demonstrated “good sense”? What factors did you need to take into consideration in order to use “good sense”—for example, your emotional response, past experiences, or evaluation of current circumstances? What was the outcome?
- Can you think of a time when you or someone you know did not use “good sense”? What kept you or this person from using “good sense”? Emotions, lack of information, uncertain outcomes, or something else? What were the consequences?

INSTRUCTIONS

This practice can be done on its own, but is best preceded by the practice [What is a Flourishing Life?](#)

PART 1: WHAT IS “GOOD SENSE” AND WHY SHOULD WE PRACTICE IT? (30 MINUTES)

- Share with students the following definition:
 - *“Good sense” means knowing what the right thing to do is, knowing how to do the right thing, and having the will to actually do the right thing.*
- Ask students to discuss in small groups or as a whole class:
 - *How would you define “good sense” in your own words?*
 - *When have you or someone you know had to act with “good sense”?*
 - *Think of a person from real life or literature who you think has demonstrated particularly “bad sense”. Describe the situation.*

- *How could a person develop "good sense"?*
- Next, tell students:
 - *The end goal of "good sense" is human flourishing or thriving.*
- Ask students to discuss in small groups or as a whole class:
 - *How would you define "human flourishing"?*
 - *What are the benefits of practicing "good sense"?*
 - *What are the potential consequences of not practicing "good sense"?*
 - *How might this end goal motivate us to practice "good sense"?*
- Show students the following dilemma: (Note: To make this exercise more applicable to students' lives, choose instead a moral dilemma that students are currently facing at school or in the world.)
 - Adam borrows \$50 from Isabella. The virtue of justice demands that each person gets what they deserve. Justice demands, therefore, that Adam reimburses Isabella the full \$50. However, when and how should it be paid back?
- Ask students to discuss or write answers to the following questions:
 - How can "good sense" be used to help Adam decide whether he should borrow the money in the first place? What sorts of things will he need to consider?
 - For example, is Adam borrowing only what he can afford to pay back? Is he borrowing the money for something that is worth having or doing? Has he ever borrowed money in the past? If so, was he able to pay it back in a timely way? Is being seen as a responsible person important to him? If he doesn't pay Isabella back in a timely way, will that ruin their friendship?
 - If Adam does borrow the money, how can he use "good sense" to determine how to pay it back?
 - For example, what options are available to Adam to help him pay the money back, e.g., getting a job or limiting his purchases that month? Do he and Isabella set a timeframe for reimbursement? Can Adam deposit \$5 in the bank every week in order to pay the loan back as soon as possible?

PART 2: HOW DO EMOTIONS AFFECT "GOOD SENSE"? (30 MINUTES)

- Tell students:
 - *Every desire or emotion gives us the opportunity to practice "good sense". While our emotional responses can tell us initially how we view a moral situation, "good sense" can help us to shape, transform, and influence our emotions to make the correct moral decision.*
- Remind students of the previous scenario in which Adam borrows money from Isabella. Ask:
 - *What emotions might be driving Adam to borrow money from Isabella?* (For example, Adam might feel **fear** because his mother lost her job and she's not sure how she's going to pay rent next month. Or Adam might feel **excitement** because borrowing this money means he can purchase a video game he's wanted for a long time. Adam might also feel **angry** because his brother lost his phone—again—and thinks it is his responsibility to help his sibling get another one.)
 - *How can "good sense" help Adam direct his emotions to make the right decision?* (For example, "good sense" can help Adam look for other ways to help his mother pay rent. Adam can also use "good sense" to help him control his craving for a video game and to earn rather than borrow money to pay for the game. "Good sense" can guide Adam to helping his brother take responsibility for getting another phone.)

- In small groups, have students think of a situation that brought up a strong emotion such as anger, fear, craving, or something else. Here are some possible examples:
 - **Anger:** Seeing another student cheat on a test; a teacher who treats students differently based on grades
 - **Fear:** Experiencing extreme stage fright before giving a speech to the whole school; being pressured by peers to try an illegal substance
 - **Craving:** Really having to have the latest video game; wanting to eat five donuts instead of one
- Through discussion, writing, and/or roleplaying, have students demonstrate to the class how practicing “good sense” can help a person to act reasonably, overriding or guiding their emotional response.

PART 3: HOW CAN WE PRACTICE “GOOD SENSE”? (45 MINUTES)

- Tell students:
 - *If we encounter difficulties in making moral decisions, perhaps the best place to start looking to fix the problem may be examining ourselves in relation to the virtue of “good sense”.*
- Have students think of a situation where they acted with “bad sense”. What was the situation? What did they do and/or say? What emotions were they feeling? How might these emotions have impacted their actions? Here are some examples:
 - Lying to parents
 - Cheating on a test
 - Gossiping about a friend
 - Stealing something
- Using the handout “[What Gets in the Way of Good Sense](#),” have students jot down some thoughts about why they might have acted with bad sense. Assure them that what they write will be kept private.
- When students have finished, ask them to share what this process was like for them. Did it give them any insight into their decision-making processes, particularly in situations that require “good sense”?
- Introduce the three steps for practicing “good sense”:
 - **Deliberation**
 - How can your past experiences help you to think about this situation?
 - What kind of person do you hope to become in this situation?
 - **Evaluation**
 - What are the morally relevant features of this situation?
 - Who have you looked to for advice or inspiration, and why?
 - What might the positive and negative implications of your decision be?
 - **Decision/Action**
 - How will you express the kind of person you want to become in this situation?
 - What will you do?
- In small groups, have students use the handout “[How to Practice Good Sense](#)” to discuss the dilemma below. What might the man’s deliberation, evaluation, and action look like? How could he show “good sense”?
 - *A man living in Dallas has been offered a better job in Chicago. His wife has bad asthma and the climate in Dallas is better for asthmatics than in Chicago. His wife’s health is more important than the size of his income. However, he is concerned that his employers will be disappointed with him and, that if he doesn’t take this opportunity, they will withhold other opportunities from him.*
- Have groups share their ideas with the whole class.

CLOSURE

- Ask students to choose a situation from their own lives, or something from current affairs, history, or literature, where “bad sense” was involved. Using the handout “[How to Practice Good Sense](#)”, have them write a short essay that describes how they or the person(s) involved could have used deliberation, evaluation, and decision/action to act with “good sense” in that situation.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do students respond more thoughtfully when making decisions, whether moral or not, after engaging in this practice? How do you know?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

“Practical wisdom”—or “good sense”—is the modern-day scientific term for Aristotle’s *phronesis*. According to the [Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues](#), practical wisdom is “the overall quality of knowing what to want and what not to want when the demands of two or more virtues collide, and to integrate such demands into an acceptable course of action.”

In other words, practical wisdom helps us to know and do the good, especially when faced with a moral dilemma. This virtue is developed mainly through experience and reflection, and is considered *the* overarching virtue because of its role in helping us to know how and when to enact all the other virtues.

In general, no agreed-upon definition for wisdom exists in [research](#), and little empirical research has been done on it. However, some researchers suggest that the [central components of wisdom](#) are cognitive (e.g., evaluating, deliberating, foresight), emotional, and reflective—all of which can be taught and potentially measured.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Currently, education focuses primarily on developing students’ thinking skills and knowledge. Yet, as many adults attest, little of what is learned in school actually prepares a person for the school called “life.”

By taking on the challenge of developing students’ wisdom or “good sense,” educators will be equipping students with the skills that will help them to cultivate lives of meaning, happiness, and virtue dedicated to serving the greater good--a flourishing life, indeed.

SOURCE

[Secondary Programme of Study](#) was originally developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation.

The Jubilee Centre is a pioneering interdisciplinary research centre focussing on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing, based at the University of Birmingham. The Centre is a leading informant on policy and practice in this area and through its extensive range of projects contributes to a renewal of character virtues in both individuals and societies. In addition to the Secondary Programme of Study linked above, a full suite of free teaching resources can be accessed here: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/432/character-education>