Is Your Child Plagiarizing?

Back in the good old days, plagiarizing meant painstakingly copying from a book or other source. Today, with access to tried-and-true Cliffs Notes and virtual resources like TermPaperGenie.com, kids can cheat in numerous ways.

The resources are so readily available that your child may not even be aware that she plagiarizes. The team at Plagiarism.org describes plagiarism as failure to put a quote in quotation marks, the fabrication of sources on a bibliography page – a fake page number or book title, for example – or the simple jumble of words in a sentence or passage, and then taking credit for the idea.

Unintentional or not, plagiarism is a form of fraud – an act of copying another's work and passing it off as your own, as well as “borrowing” ideas without citing or crediting the source. Grade schoolers and college students alike plagiarize, and the consequences are serious: a failing grade, suspension, or even expulsion from school.

It’s not easy to tell what's plagiarism and what's not, says Dr. Steven Dowshen, an expert at KidsHealth, a site that monitors children's health news. He says it may be accidental, but if you don’t identify the source, you can get into trouble.

Plagiarism can also be a product of laziness or Internet savvy: Your child can get into trouble if she “cuts and pastes” paragraphs off a site like Wikipedia, or steals her entire paper from sites like FreeEssays.com or PlanetPapers.com. (If you Google “free research paper,” for instance, the options for similar essay databases, unfortunately, are extensive.)

So how can you tell if your child is plagiarizing? The good news is that while the Internet makes it easy for your child to copy, it's just as simple for you to track her research. If you want to monitor this process, try the following:

- If there is no oral presentation accompanying her research paper, ask her to present her project to you to hear about what she has learned. If she is having trouble articulating ideas, she may not understand parts of the topic and could have “borrowed” ideas from sources

- If she is writing a book report, read the book jacket (the back cover and inside flaps), a description of the book on Web sites like Amazon and Barnes and Noble, story summaries on Wikipedia and Cliffs Notes, or author Web sites (many young adult authors have sites and blogs)

- If she is working on a research project, compare her work to information on online encyclopedias like Encyclopedia Britannica or kid search engines like Ask For Kids by inserting part of a suspicious sentence from your child’s paper into the page’s search engine

- Be on the lookout for vocabulary in her prose that is too advanced; sophisticated sentences with multiple clauses, which she may not have written on her own; and complex sentences near quotes that may be closely paraphrased

- If you share your computer with your child, look out for saved documents on the hard drive or URLs of essay databases, such as Cheathouse.com and eCheat.com, in your Web browser
• Ask to see her “works cited” page or bibliography and compare the listed book titles and their page numbers with the books she checked out from the library

• Purchase or check out a library copy of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers for your child, which is the standard style for high school and college work

If you discover your child has, in fact, copied someone else’s words or ideas, it’s important to approach her without accusation. Explain that plagiarism may be unintentional, and that it is perfectly acceptable to “over-cite” and quote from numerous sources when writing a paper. Dowshen suggests an anti-plagiarism checklist, which you can help your child create. Possible questions she can ask herself:

• Did I know this fact before I conducted my research?

• Did I credit the original source whenever I was unsure?

• When I lifted a passage from a book or Web site, did I put quotation marks around it?

• Did I add every book or Web site I consulted to my bibliography? Do I have photocopies or printouts of pages I used?

• If I don’t remember the exact page I found information, did I at least note the book or online destination?

• If I read over a sentence or idea that I’ve paraphrased, do I understand and can I explain what I wrote?

Be sure to tell your child that plagiarism is easy to do, but the consequences may be severe. If you’re engaged in her work and are conscious of the signs, however, you will be able to teach her how to avoid the deed in the future.