

B1-B2 English Worksheet

The Bad Apple Effect: Why Rule-Breaking Spreads Through Groups

26 October 2026

Article

Most people like to think they make up their own minds about right and wrong. Yet bad behaviour can catch on when we see other people break the rules. Researchers at the University of Amsterdam wanted to find out whether one 'bad apple' could affect a whole group. Their online experiment involved 750 adults in the United States. Participants watched a moving light and had to pick out the brightest square. They were told to choose accurately, but selecting a square farther to the right could earn them more money. This gave people a reason to bend the rules.

After making an initial choice, participants saw another person's decision and could change their own answer. Some saw a person who stuck to the rules, while others saw small or serious violations. Watching honest players made little difference. However, people were more likely to follow suit after seeing someone cheat, particularly when the example involved serious rule-breaking. A few even broke the rules more severely than the people they observed. The effect was stronger when the other person supported the same political party. About a quarter of the volunteers consistently followed the instructions despite earning less.

The researchers then used computer models to explore how small offences could build up and turn into wider problems. But this does not mean everybody copies poor behaviour. There was no punishment in the experiment, and real situations often involve greater risks. Nor is every broken rule harmful: questioning an unfair rule can sometimes be necessary. The study suggests that examples set by friends, colleagues and leaders can influence our decisions. It also reminds us why we sometimes need to stand our ground instead of following the crowd.

True/False

Decide if each statement is True (T) or False (F).

No.	Statement	T / F
1	The research was conducted by observing employees in their workplaces.	
2	Picking a less accurate square could increase the money a participant received.	
3	People could change their answers after viewing someone else's choice.	
4	Honest examples influenced behaviour more strongly than serious rule-breaking did.	
5	Some participants committed bigger violations than the ones they had watched.	
6	Almost everyone ignored the instructions to get the biggest possible payment.	
7	The research included computer modelling to explore how behaviour might spread.	
8	The experiment proves how people respond when there are real-world penalties.	

Sources: The Guardian, 20 October 2026; Proceedings of the Royal Society B, 21 October 2026.

Phrase Match

Match the phrases (1-10) to the correct definitions (A-J).

Phrases (1-10)	Definitions (A-J)
1. make up their own minds	A. continued obeying the instructions
2. catch on	B. identify and choose one thing from several
3. find out	C. change or develop into something different
4. pick out	D. become more common as people copy one another
5. bend the rules	E. increase gradually over time
6. stuck to the rules	F. act outside the exact rules to gain an advantage
7. follow suit	G. refuse to change our position under pressure
8. build up	H. decide what they think without being led by others
9. turn into	I. do what someone else has just done
10. stand our ground	J. discover information about something

Synonym Match

Match the words (1-10) to the correct synonyms (A-J).

Words (1-10)	Synonyms (A-J)
1. accurately	A. broader
2. violations	B. unjust
3. serious	C. breaches
4. wider	D. penalty
5. effect	E. co-workers
6. punishment	F. affect
7. unfair	G. correctly
8. colleagues	H. first
9. initial	I. major
10. influence	J. impact

Use the New Language

Choose 5 words or phrases from the worksheet and write your own sentences.

No.	Your sentence
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Discussion Questions

Student A	Student B
1. Have you ever seen someone push ahead in a queue? What happened?	1. Why might people copy bad behaviour more readily than good behaviour?
2. Which small rules do people often ignore where you live?	2. Is it fair to punish a whole group for the actions of a few members?
3. Have you ever refused to copy a crowd that was behaving badly?	3. Should minor rule-breaking be challenged before it builds up?
4. How did your teachers deal with rule-breaking when you were at school?	4. How responsible are managers when employees ignore workplace rules?
5. What do you do if a friend bends the rules during a game?	5. Can breaking an unfair rule sometimes be the right thing to do?
6. Have you ever been tempted to follow suit after seeing someone break a minor rule?	6. Why might we be more influenced by rule-breakers from our own group?
7. Which everyday rules make life easier for everyone?	7. Would tougher penalties create more honesty or simply more fear?
8. Who sets a good example of fair behaviour in your life?	8. How can a workplace encourage people to stand their ground under pressure?

Answer Key

True/False	1=F, 2=T, 3=T, 4=F, 5=T, 6=F, 7=T, 8=F
Phrase Match	1=H, 2=D, 3=J, 4=B, 5=F, 6=A, 7=I, 8=E, 9=C, 10=G
Synonym Match	1=G, 2=C, 3=I, 4=A, 5=J, 6=D, 7=B, 8=E, 9=H, 10=F

Example Sentences With the Phrases

No.	Example sentence
1	People should make up their own minds rather than copy every online opinion.
2	A risky habit can catch on when classmates start treating it as normal.
3	The manager promised to find out why the queue was moving so slowly.
4	It was difficult to pick out the correct answer from five similar choices.
5	Some players bend the rules when they think nobody is watching.
6	The referee stuck to the rules even when the crowd complained.
7	One person started applauding and the rest soon followed suit.
8	Small unpaid bills can build up into a serious financial problem.
9	A simple disagreement can turn into an argument if nobody listens.
10	We decided to stand our ground when someone pressured us to lie.