

# Fair or Foul?

## Demonstrating Fairness

### Objectives

- A** Explain the nature of fairness.
- B** Demonstrate how to treat others fairly.



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Erin decided to try out for the school play. Her audition went very well, so she was excited to see if she had gotten a part. When



she checked the cast list, however, she was disappointed to find out that she did not make it. Her friends all told her that they thought she deserved to be a part of the play because her audition went so well. Erin decided to talk to the directors of the play and find out why she was not included.

To her surprise, two of the three directors told Erin that they had wanted to cast her in the play, but the third did not. When she asked why, the third director told her, "I cast your older brother in a play five years ago, and he was so irresponsible! He always showed up late and missed practices. I didn't want to take the chance that you would act the same way he did."

The play director did not give Erin a fair chance to prove her responsibility, and instead made an assumption about her based on her brother's past actions. Erin experienced unfair treatment that kept her from pursuing her interests. When people aren't treated fairly, they do not have the chance to succeed. Learning how to treat others fairly is an essential skill to build positive relationships and make ethical decisions, both on and off the job.

## Focus on Fairness

If you have spent any time around children, you have probably heard the expression, "It's not fair!" more times than you can count! Even when we are young, we have a concept of what fairness is and what it looks like—and what it doesn't look like. You can probably remember a time when you experienced fairness or unfairness as a child: maybe your older brother got a bigger slice of cake than you, or maybe your teacher made sure that all of the students in the class got a chance to answer her questions and earn a prize. We generally understand that fairness occurs when we feel we are being treated the way we deserve to be treated.



▲ *One person in this photo probably doesn't feel he is being treated fairly!*

Fairness is more complex than we understand as children, however, and it becomes more and more important as we get older. Fair treatment does not mean that you always get your way, or that you are always happy with others' decisions. It is not only important to recognize when you and others around you are being treated fairly; it is also crucial to learn how to treat others fairly yourself.



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To introduce yourself to the concept of fairness, watch the video "Being fair: challenges and opportunities" from the General Medical Council. This video includes interviews with a diverse range of individuals who describe what fairness means to them:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2M\\_Ij04wy4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2M_Ij04wy4).



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**Fairness** is the ability to make judgments and act without favoritism or self-interest. A person who acts with fairness is **impartial**, which means that s/he is not affected by personal bias or prejudice. For example, a teacher might think that one student, Jennifer, is the best writer in the class and might expect her to do extremely well on a written assignment. However, when the teacher is grading the assignment, s/he can demonstrate fairness by reviewing papers without looking at the name attached to them. Otherwise, his/her preconceived ideas about Jennifer's (and other students') abilities might bias the grading process.



◀ *In this famous image, the balanced scale represents fairness and the blindfold represents impartiality.*

Bias and prejudice can come in many forms. Some people are biased against others because of their appearance, personality, background, or past interactions. Biases can be influenced by **stereotypes**, which are generalized, set assumptions about people or things. When these assumptions are used to form opinions in favor of or against an individual person, they are known as **prejudices**. Prejudices are judgments or opinions that are not based on fact or experience. Prejudiced beliefs lead to biased actions such as **discrimination**, which is unfair treatment of a person or a group based on the person's or group's characteristics.

You may try your hardest not to believe stereotypes or act in a biased manner, but unfortunately, everyone is guilty of allowing bias to creep in at one point or another. Maybe, for example, you are biased against a fellow classmate because he or she once made fun of your favorite shoes. Because of this incident, you refuse to work with this classmate on group projects and do not let him/her sit with your friends at lunch. While this type of bias might be understandable, a fair person does not allow such biases to affect his/her decision-making and actions.

### Fairness, Equality, and Justice

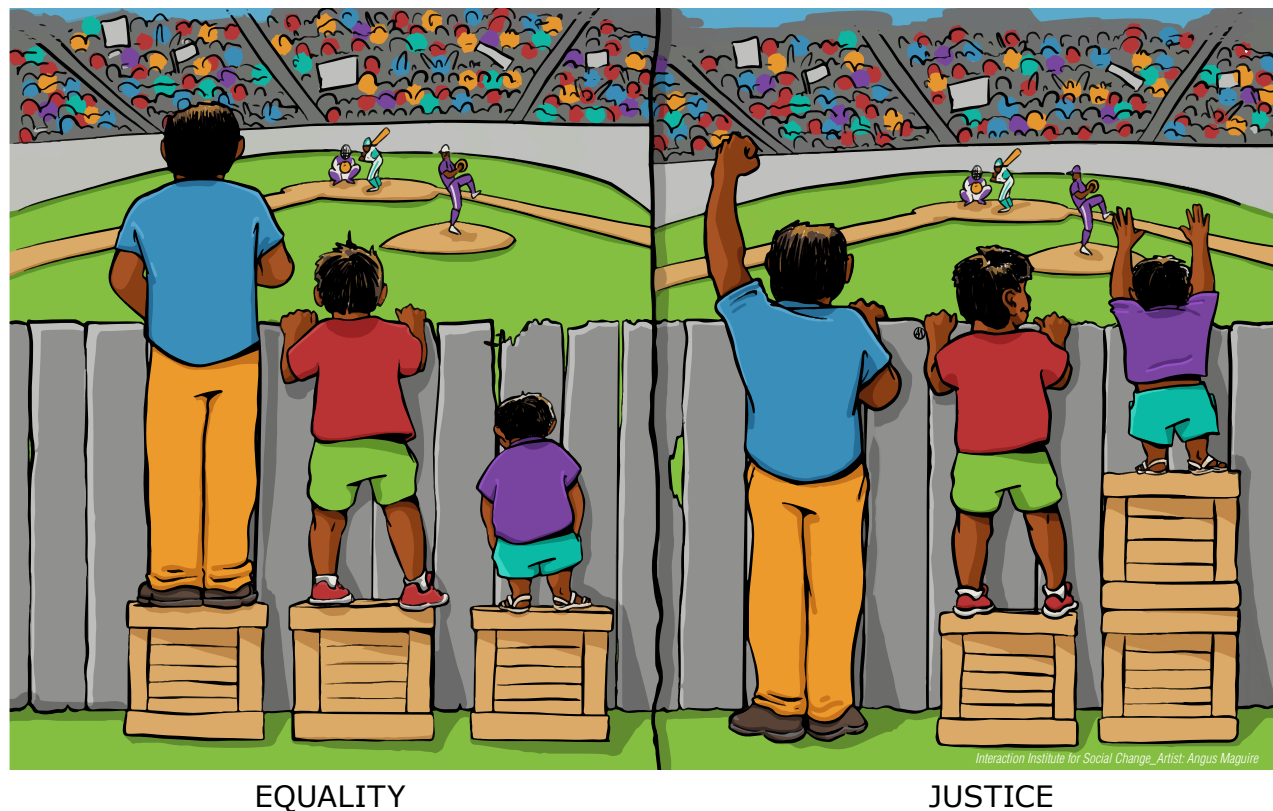
Fairness does not always look the same when put into action. People have varying opinions about what it means to be fair in different situations. Some believe that fairness means treating everyone with **equality**. From this perspective, people are treated **consistently** regardless of their individual characteristics, traits, and circumstances. From this viewpoint, identical actions lead to identical consequences, no matter who is involved. For example, if a police officer is monitoring driving speeds, s/he should pull over and ticket anyone who is driving above the speed limit, regardless of who the person is. The equality approach is meant to limit biases and prejudices by giving everyone the same rights and opportunities.



However, imagine that a police officer pulls over two drivers: one was speeding just to get home faster, while the other was speeding because his/her grandmother is in the hospital. Should both of these individuals be treated consistently, despite the differences in their situations? The principle of equality would suggest that yes, these two committed the same action and should be treated as equals. However, equality is not the only way to understand fairness.

Another approach uses the concept of **justice**. Justice is a complicated topic that is interpreted in many different ways. In the context of fairness, justice means treating others how they deserve to be treated according to an ethical understanding of what is right. Justice goes beyond treating people consistently. When you act with justice in mind, you are taking a person's unique characteristics into account when determining what is fair for that individual.

The following image can help to explain the difference between the justice and equality approaches to fairness.



As you can see, sometimes equality doesn't seem fair. In situations such as this one, it may be necessary to treat people differently according to their needs so that everyone receives a fair outcome.

You have probably experienced this difference between equality and justice in school, at work, or in your personal life. For example, students who have a learning disability might be given more time to complete an exam, or your new coworker might be allowed to make mistakes that you can't because s/he has less experience than you. Sometimes, inconsistent treatment can feel like unfairness at first, especially if you are unaware of someone's personal situation. It's important to use a critical eye and to truly understand if fairness is being achieved. In some instances, you might need to treat others consistently, and in others, you might need to treat others differently because of their unique circumstances. Equality and justice are both important principles to understand when learning to treat others fairly.



- ▲ *Before becoming upset that a classmate gets extra help from the teacher, consider that classmate's unique needs.*



Check out the video "Justice, Fairness, What's Right, What's Wrong" and hear Darin Haig use familiar children's stories to illustrate the concepts of fairness and justice. Start at the 5:34 mark: <https://youtu.be/vgAQMfnW4nk?t=5m34s>.

## THE GRAY ZONE

What should we do to address unfairness that occurred in the past? This is a question that many societies ask themselves, and one of the answers that has emerged is affirmative action. Affirmative action is a policy that many countries have enacted to help balance fairness and unfairness between disadvantaged groups and advantaged groups. Affirmative action attempts to make amends for the effects of past oppression by bridging inequalities in employment, education, and the political sphere.

In the U.S., one example of affirmative action is in the university system. Many schools consider race as a factor during the admissions process because they want to build a diverse student body and give those who have been treated unfairly in the past the opportunity to succeed. For example, if two candidates with equal academic records are both being considered and only one can be admitted, a university might choose to admit the student who is of a minority group to promote diversity and provide opportunities for those who have been prevented from pursuing them in the past. Others prefer a “color-blind” approach, where race is not considered and everyone is treated equally regardless of historical context.

What do you think? Is affirmative action fair or unfair? What other methods can societies use to combat the effects of past unfairness?

## What Does Fairness Look Like?

A person who treats others with fairness has many traits that contribute to his/her ability to be fair. These traits can be seen in many situations, from school to work to everyday life. A fair person is:

**Empathetic.** One of the most important ways to understand fairness is to be empathetic, which includes understanding and identifying with the thoughts, feelings, values, attitudes, and/or actions of another person. People with empathy understand others' points of view and are able to use that information to be fair to everyone, regardless of who they are.

**Respectful.** Simply understanding how someone feels is not enough to act with fairness, however; people who treat others fairly also demonstrate their respect for others and others' feelings. To treat someone fairly, you must feel that each person has an inherent right to be respected as much as anyone else. For example, if your manager at work respects all employees for their contributions, s/he will give everyone the deserved praise and recognition rather than playing favorites or giving one person all of the credit.



▲ *A great way to develop empathy is to truly listen when others talk to you.*





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**Generous.** Those who are fair to others share with everyone. They do not allow their own selfishness to outweigh their desire to give equally to those who deserve it. For instance, if Reyna’s mother pays her \$20 to clean the house, but she shares the workload with her two younger siblings, Reyna can show fairness by giving at least a third of the money to each of her siblings rather than keeping it for herself.

**Reliable.** Fair people can be trusted to maintain fairness in all situations and to never let bias interfere with their treatment of others. If behavior is not consistent, it is not truly fair because people are not always getting what they deserve in all situations. People who demonstrate fairness consistently have **integrity**. Integrity is adhering to an established set of personal ethics and sound moral principles. It includes following one’s values, even when it is difficult. Someone with integrity can be relied upon to be fair at all times.



**Honest.** Honesty is important to fairness because it allows everyone to have access to the same information. Being truthful gives people the knowledge they need to make informed decisions. If a company is downsizing, for example, a fair boss would share that information with all parties who are affected, rather than just a few. While it may be tempting in some situations to lie or hide information, people deserve the truth, and it’s not fair to keep them from seeing the whole picture.



**Open-minded.** Open-minded people are generally free from biases and judgments, which makes them well suited for fairness. When someone is open-minded, s/he considers all points of view and weighs information without preconceptions.

**Reasonable.** Acting with fairness requires a good sense of judgment and the ability to use reason to reach conclusions. Those who treat others fairly use their sense of logic to determine what is and isn't fair, especially when the situation is not a simple or clear one.

## Why Be Fair?

Treating others with fairness results in many positive effects. Two important ways that it can improve your life are in your relationships and in your decision-making.

**Fair relationships.** Treating others with fairness is essential to forming positive relationships, both in your personal life and professionally. When you treat someone fairly, your relationship with that person is equal and balanced. One person is not taking advantage of the other or getting more out of the relationship than the other. For example, to treat your coworker fairly, you would not ask him/her to do your work for you, unless you were willing to take on some of his/her responsibilities in return. Your coworker will then feel that s/he can depend on you to be respectful and reliable. This type of balanced relationship builds trust and allows people to compromise with one another, leading to more productivity and fulfilling interactions—and less conflict.



▲ *If you treat your coworkers fairly, they'll be more likely to treat you fairly. You'll all be happier, more productive, and more successful!*

**Fair decision-making.** Fairness is essential to making decisions. If you are fair when you make decisions, you will remove biases and prejudices that could impact your decision and cause problems. Instead, your decision will be based on making sure all people involved are treated the way they deserve and are able to succeed. Using fairness as a decision-making tool can not only simplify the process but also help to ensure that decisions are ethical. If you are fair, everyone involved in the decision-making process will feel respected and your actions will be balanced, consistent, and impartial.

## Summary

Fairness is the ability to make judgments and act without favoritism or self-interest. Fairness ensures that every person gets what s/he deserves and is treated with respect and dignity. People take different approaches when attempting to act with fairness. Sometimes fairness means that people are treated equally, but sometimes fairness means that people are treated justly. Equality means treating everyone consistently despite individual differences. Justice occurs when people are treated the way they deserve based on ethical principles. This can mean that they are treated differently based on their unique needs. Both approaches are important and appropriate for different situations. Many personal characteristics contribute to an individual's ability to treat others fairly. It is important to treat others fairly to build positive relationships and to make ethical decisions.

## TOTAL RECALL

1. The ability to make judgments and act without favoritism or self-interest is known as \_\_\_\_\_.
2. What are stereotypes?
3. What are prejudices?
4. What is discrimination?
5. What is the equality approach to fairness?
6. What is the justice approach to fairness?
7. What are some characteristics of people who treat others fairly?
8. How does fairness impact relationships?
9. How does fairness impact decision-making?

## Play Fair!

Treating others fairly isn't always easy, but the following techniques can help you incorporate fairness into your actions and decisions. Keeping these goals in mind will help you to be fair to everyone you encounter in your daily life.

**Follow the Golden Rule—and the Platinum Rule.** The Golden Rule means treating others the way you would like to be treated. The Platinum Rule means treating others the way they want to be treated. Both of these ideas are essential to fairness. Empathy is important when thinking about how others would like to be treated. If you lack empathy, you may find it difficult to act with fairness. For example, imagine that one of your classmates doesn't speak English and needs a translator to help him with his homework. If you are unable to put yourself in his shoes and understand why he might have different needs in order to succeed, you will not be able to treat him with the fairness he deserves. Paying close attention to others' needs and preferences will help you to act fairly.

**Prevent bias.** Reducing prejudice and biases is one of the most difficult and important ways to ensure that you are treating others fairly. Even those of us who believe we are free from bias and prejudice might not be aware of their effects on us. You can do your best to be unbiased by thinking carefully about every decision you make and whether or not you are being impartial. Consult others who have different viewpoints to gain perspectives that you might not have previously considered. Use good judgment to weigh each thought evenly. You should also openly discuss differences with others. Attempt to understand opposing or varying standpoints rather than making uninformed decisions. Keeping an open mind and being aware of your knowledge gaps will help you overcome any biases you might have.



◀ *If you pay attention to the world around you, you'll see countless opportunities to treat others fairly.*

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**Follow rules—or change them! Rules** are regulations or principles that govern conduct. You are probably familiar with the rules that are in place at school, in your workplace, at your house, or in society. Generally, rules are based on ethics, so they tend to promote fairness. For example, your school’s rule against cheating makes sure that everyone has a fair and equal chance of succeeding on assessments and projects. If you are looking for a guide to acting with fairness, following the rules can be a good start.

Not all rules promote fairness, however. Rules are not perfect; sometimes they are ineffective or become outdated. In other cases, rules are too limited or do not do enough to promote fairness. For example, imagine that your school has a rule against using any sort of electronic devices. However, let’s say that you like to read and study using a tablet, and you would like to be able to do so in class. This rule might seem unfair because it is keeping you from learning in the way that you prefer.

When the rules seem to conflict with your understanding of fairness, you might not know what to do. Take the initiative to find out why the rules are in place and, if possible, try to change the rules or create new rules to reflect fairness more effectively. In the above example, you could see if the school would change the rule to allow electronic devices to be used for academic purposes. Don’t be afraid to question the established procedures and attempt to make changes that help you treat others fairly.

- ▶ *Asking questions in a respectful manner can help you understand rules that seem unfair.*



**Take accountability.** To act with fairness, you must take responsibility for your choices, actions, and decisions, even when you make a mistake. Blaming others when things go wrong is not a fair way to treat people. For instance, if your group project at school receives a poor grade, you should accept your fair share of responsibility for why it happened, rather than blaming your group members for their errors.



**Communicate and listen.** You can demonstrate fairness by communicating openly and listening attentively to others. Respecting others by carefully considering their viewpoints gives everyone a fair chance to share ideas. Keep conversations honest and respectful so that everyone can be heard. Furthermore, you should always try to accept feedback from others with a fair and open mind. It can be difficult to hear criticism of your work or actions and you may find yourself becoming defensive. To truly respect others' ideas, however, you must listen to what they say and try to reflect on their thoughts without your personal biases getting in the way.



*justme\_yo/iStock/Thinkstock*

**Stick up for others.** Treating others fairly yourself is important, but it is also important to intervene when you see unfair treatment happening around you. Whether it occurs at school, in the workplace, or in your community, you can learn to identify unfairness and try to prevent it. If you see a classmate being bullied, what is the fair thing to do? You could walk up to the bullies and tell them to stop. Or, if you learn that a local homeless shelter is being torn down due to insufficient funds, you could start a fundraiser to support those in the community who are in need. Everyone can do his/her part to make communities more fair.

Do different cultures have different concepts of what fairness means? The article "A focus on fairness" from the *Harvard Gazette* focuses on studies that examine the ways in which children from various countries understand inequity: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/11/a-focus-on-fairness/>.



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## Summary

Treating others with fairness is not always as simple as it might seem. Several techniques can help you to be fair throughout your life. Always follow the Golden Rule and the Platinum Rule by treating others the way you want to be treated and the way they would want to be treated. Also, try your best to prevent your biases from affecting your decisions and actions by being open-minded and using good judgment. Generally, following the rules will help you to treat others fairly, but sometimes rules are inadequate. You can strive to change the rules to make them more fair if necessary. Taking accountability for your actions can also help you avoid unfairly blaming others. Communication and listening are key skills that will help you understand different ideas and critique yourself. Finally, you should stand up against unfairness that you witness around you so that everyone can receive fair treatment.

## TOTAL RECALL

1. What are six techniques that can help you treat others fairly?