



## AN EDUCATION (Cert 12)

**Reel Issues Author:** Ian Maher

**Overview:** A teenage girl encouraged to win an Oxford University place is distracted by the glamorous lifestyle apparently offered by an older, sophisticated charmer. But all is not what it seems to be.

**Director:** Lone Sherfig

**Distributor:** E1 Entertainment UK

**Length:** 96 minutes

**Cautions:** Contains moderate sex references.

### SUMMARY OF PLOT

Twickenham, 1961. Jenny (Carey Mulligan) is a clever 16-year-old whose parents Jack (Alfred Molina) and Marjorie (Cara Seymour) have worked hard to give her the chance of earning a place at Oxford University. They are a close family, though considerable pressure is exerted on Jenny to do well academically.

On her way home from school, carrying her cello, Jenny is caught in a heavy downpour at which point a smart car pulls alongside. The driver is a charming young man named David (Peter Sarsgaard), some years older than Jenny, who offers her a lift. They seem to have much in common, not least a love of music.

Shortly afterwards flowers are left on Jenny's doorstep. When she later bumps into David he invites her to a classical concert and though she is unsure of how her parents will respond, David persuades them to say yes. After the concert, where they meet up with David's friends Danny (Dominic Williams) and Helen (Rosamund Pike), the four dine together at a club.

Jenny is swept off her feet by David who deceives Jack and Marjorie into allowing her to spend a weekend in Oxford with him, having lied about his own education and convincing them he could introduce Jenny to the

famous author C. S. Lewis. Jenny goes along with the deception.

It soon becomes apparent to Jenny that the lifestyles of David and his friends are funded by some dubious schemes. Though at first Jenny has her reservations, the combination of her having fallen for David along with the excitement he brings, results in her turning a blind eye. Soon after spending a weekend in Paris where Jenny sleeps with David, the two become engaged.

The distractions in Jenny's life cause her school grades to fall and she drops out, much to the consternation of her headmistress (Emma Thompson) and her teacher Miss Stubbs (Olivia Williams). Surprisingly, in the light of their earlier pressure on Jenny, her parents seem relaxed about Jenny's decision, believing David to be an Oxford man there therefore a successful and upstanding partner for their daughter.

One night, when Jenny discovers some letters in the glove compartment of David's car she realises the terrible truth that he is already married, his wife living just a few streets away. David shows his true colours, not even being able to face up to his actions with Jenny's parents. Jenny's life crashes down around her.

There is, however, an upbeat ending to this film. Jenny finds the strength to acknowledge that she had messed up and made wrong choices and having been refused re-entry to her school she asks Miss Stubbs for help and eventually wins her place at Oxford.

### SOME KEY ISSUES

**Family values** – Like all parents, Jack and Marjorie want the best for the daughter Jenny. Realising she is very bright Jack in particular places high expectations on Jenny's shoulders to win a place at Oxford, he and Marjorie making sacrifices along the way to give Jenny

this opportunity. But even within such a close family, there are fault lines and pressures.

**Deception** – David is, on the surface, a likeable young man who sweeps Jenny off her feet and quickly makes a positive impact with her parents. He proves, however, to be both a con-man and an adulterer. His deception has damaging and far-reaching consequences. Coming to terms with being deceived is a costly thing, with lives often devastated to satisfy the selfishness of the person(s) responsible.

**Humility** – The response of both Jenny and her parents in the aftermath of David's deception being uncovered is admirable. Jenny also seems painfully aware of the impact on David's wife of his infidelity when she meets her briefly. Jenny shows herself to be a big enough person to acknowledge her mistakes and find a positive way forward. It takes a lot for a person to acknowledge mistakes and shortcomings and move on constructively.

## CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

### Clip 1 – DVD chapters 1 & 2 (approx 14 mins)

This opening section of film sets the scene for Jenny's family background in early 1960s Twickenham. Constrained by the expectations of her parents, and father in particular, free-spirited Jenny becomes fascinated by the apparently sophisticated lifestyle of the charming young man who offers her a lift home.

#### *Whole group buzz session*

- Ask people what words/phrases that come to mind about Jenny's family experience. Write up responses on a piece of flipchart paper and then identify both the positives and the negatives.
- Small groups activity and feedback

- Talk together about what the expression 'family values' means within contemporary society. Express your findings on a piece of flipchart paper. This can be in the form of a list, a diagram, a sketch, or whatever is helpful to you to capture your thinking.
- Feed back your findings and notice if there were any striking similarities or differences.

#### *Whole group discussion*

- Do you think the pressure placed on Jenny by her father to excel educationally was justified? Why was it so important to him that she made it to Oxford?
- What differences are there (if any) between the family values of 1961 and those of today?
- What do you think are the most difficult pressures affecting young people today?

### Clip 2 – DVD chapters 9 & 10 (approx 20 minutes)

David has swept Jenny off her feet and taken her to Paris for the weekend. In this clip Jenny faces the consequences at her school on returning from Paris. At first she is not too bothered by her decision but then discovers the terrible truth about David.

#### *Small groups discussion*

With David's 'charming' deception having worked its spell on Jenny, she is unable to accept the criticisms or advice of either her teacher or her headmistress. Their approaches to Jenny are quite different but get the same result.

- What distinguished the attitudes of the two women?
- Which approach do you think was more likely to have a lasting impression on Jenny, and why?

*Post-it notes exercise*

In preparation, give each member of the group a supply of post-it notes, and draw up two columns on a piece of flipchart paper. At the top of the first column write 'Jenny', on the second 'Jenny's parents'.

- Using your post-it notes write down (one per post-it) the thoughts and feelings that you think Jenny and her parents experienced on uncovering David's deception. Stick them on the flipchart.
- Whole group discussion
- In light of responses to the post-it notes exercise, if Jenny's parents came to you for advice about what to do in the aftermath of their daughter's terrible experience, and as victims of deception themselves, what would you suggest?
- Making mistakes is an unavoidable part of life in general and, arguably, growing up in particular. But to what extent do you think our own society actually contributes to young people making unnecessary poor and even harmful choices about their lives?

**Clip 3 – DVD chapters 11 & 12  
(approx 12 minutes)**

Slowly, Jenny begins to pick up the pieces of her young life. The support of her parents remains constant and her father acknowledges his own failure in being strung along by David. Determined to get to Oxford but with her request to return to school denied, Jenny asks her former teacher for her forgiveness and her help.

*Whole group discussion*

- Do you agree or disagree with the decision of Jenny's headmistress not to allow her back to continue her studies, and why?

- What factors do you think contributed to the mature way in which Jenny responded when her life had become such a mess?

*Small groups activity and feedback*

- When we get things wrong in life and suffer the consequences it can sometimes be difficult to put them behind and move on. Why do you think this is? What are some of the things that hold us back? Draw up a list.
- Compare your list with the other group(s). How evident are pride and related topics in the list? To what extent does the focus on success and achievement that is prevalent in society make it harder for a person to deal with the consequences of making mistakes?

*Personal reflection and sharing in pairs/threes*

- Think of a time in your own life when you have learnt from a mistake or drawn something positive from a difficult experience. If you feel able, share this.
- How might you share insights arising from that situation with a person facing a similar tough dilemma?

**GOD'S STORY**

**Family values – Exodus 20.12;  
Proverbs 17.6; Ephesians 5.21-6.4.**

What becomes apparent both from these verses and other from places throughout the Bible is the mutual responsibility that family members have towards each other. Parents of course have greater responsibility for their children as dependents, though the circle often turns in later life as old age takes its toll. Important ingredients within the family mix are mutual respect,

trust, and love understood as caring, unselfish service and commitment.

#### *Discussion starters*

- 'Respect (honour) your father and mother' is a familiar phrase that many would agree with whatever their religious belief. Should the same be expected from parents towards their children? In what ways might Jenny's father have related to her differently prior to her meeting David?
- Young people often get a bad press, much of it unjustified. Why do you think this is the case?
- What could be done to help ensure that the positive and creative contribution of young people to our society is valued and celebrated? How might their voices be better heard?

#### **Deception – Matthew 4.1–11; Mark 7.14–23.**

Through a series of temptations the devil sought to deceive Jesus into making the wrong choices. Jesus spotted the danger and avoided the trap. In the passage from Mark's gospel, Jesus highlights the serious and harmful nature of deceit by including it in a list of the things that diminish us. Deception, by its very nature, is not obvious. When Jesus was tempted, the choices seemed like good things to embrace. The deception was that harmful ambitions were, in fact, good. In An Education David's deception convinced Jenny that the trappings of his self-indulgent lifestyle were worth chasing; even that they were what made life worthwhile. In the light of truth they turned to ashes.

#### *Small groups activity and discussion*

- Think for a few moments about the society in which we live, and then consider situations in which people might be victims of deception. Make

a note of your findings. (Hints: values that may be questionable but which are accepted as the norm in our society; e-mail scams; marketing gimmicks; media distortion of facts).

- In what ways might young people in our society be helped to avoid being deceived by the temptations that come their way?

#### *Discussion starters*

- What can we learn from the way in which Jesus avoided the temptations that were set before him?
- If you have been the victim, or know someone who has been on the receiving end of an act of deception, what lessons can be taken from the experience? In hindsight, could it have been prevented and, if so, how?
- What role do you think people of faith have to play in making society more open and honest?

#### **Humility – Matthew 11.28–29; Philippians 2.5–8; Colossians 3.12–15**

In contrast to the ugliness of deception is the beauty of humility. The verses above show Jesus as the exemplar of a life given in humble service of others. Colossians lists humility as a hallmark of the Christian life. One particular situation in life where humility is needed is when mistakes have been made. This is seldom easy. Facing up to the consequences of getting things wrong requires courage from the person involved. Yet such humility often becomes the key to unlock forgiveness and the means of moving on.

#### *Buzz session*

Write up all the word associations you can think of in relation to the word 'humility'.

*Discussion starters*

- How would you describe the relationship between humility and the experience of forgiveness? Do you think you need one to receive the other?
- What makes 'sorry' such a hard word to say?
- Personal reflection – some thoughts to take away
- Think of a time in your life when you have given or received a heartfelt 'sorry'. How did it make you feel?

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