

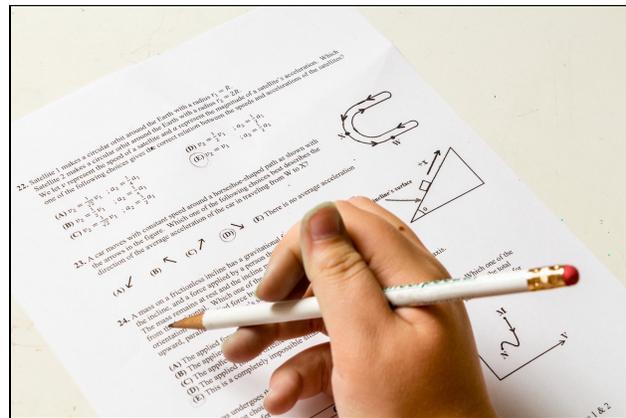
Name: _____ Class: _____

Safety of Numbers

By Lucy Tan
2015

*Lucy Tan is a contemporary author whose writing often explores the meaning of home and family. In this story, a daughter learns some surprising information about her mother's past. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing how complex characters develop by coming to an important realization. This means paying attention to how they perceive others and the world. As you read, take note of how the narrator's understanding of her mother changes over the course of the story.*

[1] When my friend Bobby Klein didn't make it into the gifted program back in fifth grade, Mom said, "What's so hard about IQ? There's nothing you can't study for." She's right, in my case. There is nothing she can't make me study for. She keeps a schedule that she brings out whenever I'm not where I'm supposed to be. On Saturdays, for example, when she catches me leaving through the kitchen door, she points to the red letters that read, SAT. I say, "Yeah Ma, I know it's a Saturday!" and Dad chuckles, which is his way of commiserating.¹



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My mother is from northern China, a woman with a small face and a big voice and hair that springs from her head so fiercely you're sure it's about to have a word with you. She walks home for lunch every day because she believes in moderate exercise and the health hazards of plastic food containers. She is petrified² of credit theft, house theft, car theft, and AIDS; uncomfortable around emotional confrontation and underachievement.

By the time other kids in my year start prepping for the SAT, I have already taken nine months of classes. Twelve, if you count algebra drills. Most of Mom's child-rearing energy is spent on my education, and she's impatient for results. She likes the kinds of success you can plot and graph, reports you can hold in your hand. This makes the SAT the score of all academic scores, representing both a return on one investment³ and the principal for the next.

"Like the Americans say," she muses, "safety of numbers. That's what colleges want to see."

[5] "You mean 'safety in numbers,'"⁴ I tell her. "And that's something completely different."

She lets out a little laugh. "You think you know everything? The main word there is safety. What do you know about safety?"

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1. **Commiserate (verb):** to express or feel sympathy or pity
 2. **Petrified (adjective):** extremely frightened; terrified
 3. When someone invests money, they hope to get a "return" when it increases in value.
 4. "Safety in numbers" is a figure of speech, meaning that you are safer doing something with a group of people than doing it alone.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly,” she says, as if that answers anything.

Mom works in the Procurement Department of a Sears satellite office, where she orders desk chairs and tracks the average lifespan of IBM laptops. They’re big into motivation⁵ over at Sears. Every so often Mom goes on a company retreat and comes back with posters that say things like CONQUER IT and OPPORTUNITY. She hangs a select few up in the study, but recently, a poster called ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS moved her enough to earn a spot on the kitchen wall. That poster has an image of a running track, where a white hand passes a baton off to a brown hand. I have seen this same picture in our college advisor’s office, except that one said DIVERSITY. I find it troubling that these photos are used for more than one type of motivation, but my best friend Caterina thinks it’s funny. “Your mom and Mrs. Staedtler have the same taste in decorating,” she says. I don’t tell her that there are still more posters in the garage that haven’t made it onto the walls, lesser motivations, like TEAMWORK and ACCEPTANCE. I don’t say that the total supply of motivation in our house could put Mrs. Staedtler out of a job.

[10] During the afternoons, while Mom is still at work, I invite friends over to watch TRL on MTV. Cat gets up to reenact the music videos, and everyone gives her performance points on a scale of one to ten. We write the scores on sticky notes and fix them to ping-pong paddles scavenged⁶ from the basement. Then we wave the paddles around and yell and sometimes someone turns to me and says, “I don’t know what you’re talking about — your house is fun!”

After Total Request Live, the reruns of Road Rules and The Real World come on, as well as a relationship show called The Blame Game, in which couples go on TV to expose⁷ each other’s flaws. There’s a lot of shouting involved, and it always ends with a karaoke segment. Most of my friends leave before this point, but I watch the whole thing. I love the elements of surprise and power play. Just when you think one person is winning the hearts of the audience, bam! He expects her to hand-wash his underwear! At a quarter to five, I switch the TV back to one of Dad’s channels before turning it off. In my room, I arrange binders around my desk and fabricate fresh eraser dust. By the time Mom gets home, my eyes look bleary from studying instead of watching Ruthie Alcaide⁸ run around naked on TV all afternoon.

Some nights, after my parents have gone to bed, Cat rides over on her brother’s bike and parks it under my window. We live in a ranch-style house, so it’s only a four-foot drop from my room, but the window screen isn’t removable. At least, not in the sense that you can put it back afterward. The first time I sneaked out, it was winter. We pulled and pushed on the screen until it started to crack. For every three minutes spent pulling and pushing, we waited one, just in case someone was awake and listening. When it finally came off, Cat propped it up against the house, like a portrait ready to be hung. It stayed there until the spring, when Dad found it while clearing the backyard.

“What happened here?” he called from outside.

“I think the wind blew it off.”

5. **Motivation** (*noun*): the desire to do something; enthusiasm; determination

6. **Scavenge** (*verb*): to collect items that have been thrown away

7. **Expose** (*verb*): to uncover or reveal

8. a contestant on the MTV shows *The Real World: Hawaii*, *Battle of the Sexes*, *The Gauntlet 2*, and *The Duel II*

[15] “Where are we, Kansas?”

“Probably a raccoon then.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” he said. “A raccoon. Or, you know, a stray Cat.” He held my gaze just a moment longer than he had to. Then he dragged the screen out front to the garage.

The garage is Dad’s hobby shop — full of our neighbors’ discarded furniture and lawn equipment lined up and shining like overgrown insects. Crouched next to him out there, and in pauses between the buzzing of his electric sander, I can sometimes get him to talk about Mom’s crazy.

“Back in China, college entrance exams were serious stuff,” he says. “We had one shot — the gaokao⁹ — and that test meant the difference between becoming a scholar and a laborer, between a chance at America and no chance at all. Those scores? They mattered.”

[20] There were other scores that mattered. Seventeen million of Mao’s youth were sent to the countryside for reeducation. Ten thousand arrested in connection with the June fourth movement.¹⁰ Hundreds to thousands killed at Tiananmen Square.¹¹ “Isn’t that the scariest thing,” he says, “the fact that those death-toll numbers are missing?”

“Yeah,” I say, but the truth is that I don’t really know. I can’t imagine the difference between ten thousand and seventeen million. I can’t imagine something so abstract as death, or so concrete as Mom’s involvement in all this.

“Wait here,” he says. He puts down the sander and goes over to the metal shelves that line the back of the garage. Motivational posters land on the floor, and on top of them, the lids of cardboard document boxes. When he comes back, he’s holding a faded photo of people standing together in a half circle in front of a school. Mom is there in the center, her head turned and eyes just barely catching the camera, as though distracted in mid-speech.

“She was an activist,”¹² he says. “This was taken in May of 1989. If you think about it, you’re in this picture too.” I imagine myself over on the other side of the world, a tiny embryo stuck to the inside of her, like a snail.

“You’re more like her than you think,” he says.

[25] “Yeah, right. How?”

“You’re fearless.”

He hands me a can of Mountain Dew from the stash he keeps hidden in the garage. Mom says Mountain Dew is the color of cancer, and even though I know that cancer doesn’t have a color, the thought has put me off Mountain Dew. I drink the soda anyway, and it’s not as bad as I remember.

9. This is also referred as the National College Entrance Exam in China, and it lasts nine hours and is completed over the course of two to three days.

10. The June fourth movement refers to student-led protests against the Chinese government in 1989.

11. Thousands of protesters were killed or wounded when the Chinese military fired on protesters in Tiananmen Square.

12. **Activist (noun):** a person who works to bring about political or social change

I'm sure Mom has reasons for running our lives the way she does, even if they only hold up in her own mind. Call them superstitions then, or the practices of a self-made faith. Somewhere there is a god that demands double-locking doors and triple-checking my homework. What I want to know is how the politics and the soda connect. In other words, at what point did she become so small in her living of life?

I don't say any of this, but it's as if Dad hears anyway. "They're her stories," he says softly. "I can't tell them."

- [30] Later that week, as I am going through my Reading Comprehension study pile, I find that Dad has slipped in a few articles on modern Chinese history. In one of them, there is a picture of twenty or so tanks headed single-file down a broad avenue. At the very corner of the frame, a person stands right up against the first tank. It almost looks as though he or she is directing the artillery,¹³ but the caption below reads "Tiananmen Square, June 4, 1989: **Civil** Disobedience." This person, I think, could be Mom. And the more I stare, the more I'm convinced it is her. The picture is grainy, but I can almost recognize her ferocious hair.

The closer the SAT gets, the more little red letters appear on my schedule. Mom thinks she's being very American by making a baseball metaphor about "going to third base" and then doesn't want to know why I'm laughing. She works from home one day a week so that she can help me with drills after school. Without my friends there, the house feels empty and unfamiliar. Mom counts vocabulary flashcards while I stare into my lap, or at the napkin holder, or at a nearby stack of newspapers on the kitchen table. I wish she would pour herself a drink, the way Cat's mother does when she comes home from work. I wish she would get drunk on sorghum wine like the Chinese families that used to stay with us sometimes. Just off the plane, they had a weird dusty smell on them, as if they'd been shipped straight from Mom's past. They snacked on whole fruits — apples and oranges and round pears with flesh so light it looked translucent. When they drank, they started speaking about the eighties in a way that made Mom go psspsps with her lips. Not in front of the kid.

"Alacrity," Mom says, flipping through the cards. Her tone reminds me of old people playing bingo. "Esoteric."

Sometimes I test her vocabulary too. For instance, I know that on the back of the card that reads "brusque,"¹⁴ there is written only the word "short," so I answer, "vertically challenged," to see if she knows the difference. When she doesn't, I shout in my head Aha! You lose! and squint one eye shut to picture her face on the Blame Game Wall of Shame. Other times, I define words in French or Ebonics. "la mode de ma mère."¹⁵ "Vexed,"¹⁶ she reads, and I answer, "When b***** be all up in yo' steez." At this, she drops the deck and glares. "Concentrate on your first language. You can be funny after you get into Harvard."

13. large guns or cannons used in warfare

14. **Brusque (adjective):** responding with few words in a rude way. If someone speaks to you in a "brusque" way, you can also say that person is being "short" with you.

15. This French phrase means "my mother's style."

16. **Vex (verb):** to make someone feel annoyed, frustrated, or worried

One day, I forget my class project and my keys at home. During sixth period, Cat rides me back to my house on her bike and we try each window, including the one without the screen, but they are locked — all except one. We have to look up to see it. It's two feet high, three feet wide, and positioned six feet off the ground, in the corner of my parents' bedroom. With the help of a garbage bin and a boost from Cat, I wriggle my way through the opening and land on Mom's bureau-top, knocking several things over in the process. But there's no time to clean up, so I grab what I need and leave through the front door.

- [35] That afternoon, there is a cop car parked in the driveway. I walk in to find my mom in the living room with two policemen. When she sees me, she yells, "Someone robbed our house!"

One of the cops standing in our living room is Bobby Klein's dad, and he winks at me discreetly.¹⁷

"Ma'am," he says, putting a hand on Mom's shoulder, "nothing is missing."

"Yes, yes, but..." She points to the hallway and gives him the look of exasperation she usually saves for supermarket managers and DMV reps. "I came home early. Maybe I scared them away."

Through the doorway of the bedroom, I can see the open window, a felled plant, a trail of soil, and a few bottles of Clinique Moisture-Lock lying on their sides among the rest of the bureau-top battalion.

- [40] "We've searched the house and everything's fine. Maybe a wild animal came in for a little visit, that's all."

At "little visit," Mom glares at Mr. Klein as if he has extended this invitation himself.

"And the missing screen on my daughter's window?" she finishes. "Was that an animal too?"

Now, each morning before she leaves for work, Mom checks to make sure every window and door in our house is locked. "What period is your Euro exam?" (Click.) "And did you finish the second draft of your Tom Stoppard essay?" (Click.) I sip on my orange juice and wait until she leaves. Then I go into her bedroom, unlock the tiny window, and leave it open just an inch.

Seeing Mom panic thrills me. She doesn't call the cops again, but late at night I can hear her talking to Dad about moving money between banks and getting fancy alarm systems installed. Sometimes, in the middle of chopping vegetables or writing a letter, she suddenly closes a hand over her neck to check that her gold chain is still there, or brushes a thumb against her ring finger to feel for her wedding band. One night, I overhear a conversation in their bedroom:

- [45] "You don't believe in spirits, do you?" she asks Dad.

"There aren't any spirits," Dad replies, no follow-up questions asked. He is used to her habit of starting conversations out loud in the middle of the ones already going on inside her head.

17. **Discreet** (*adjective*): careful or low-key; not drawing attention

I'm not evil, I swear it. But once I start, I can't stop. Cat says this is because there is something lacking in me, a form of drama that is missing from my life. "It's like you live in a bad indie movie," she says. "All mood, no conflict." What she means is, why don't I reason with my mother? Why don't I bring issues to light? Cat doesn't understand what it's like to deal with a parent like mine. She has four older brothers, and it's a rare day if their mom can call them all by the right names. Her family practices Delegated¹⁸ Discipline, which means each kid is in charge of keeping the next youngest in line. Any "reasoning" done by her brothers is carried out through use of their fists.

I'm not good at math. The verbal analogies¹⁹ and sentence completions are easy, but the math gets me every time. "X and Y are not interchangeable," Mom says. "You have to assign things value." She stands behind me with a stopwatch as I drill, peering at my pencil marks and blocking the overhead light. "One minute forty-two seconds per question," she says, doing quick division in her head. "Not fast enough." After I finish a section, she checks it to identify the types of problems that take me the longest to complete. I like to watch her work for a change, to see the crease between her eyebrows grow into the shape of a butt crack.

That final week of preparations, I barely leave the house at all. Mom has me in bed by nine thirty every night and taking Vitamin C pills every day, just in case. On the Friday before the test, I am concentrating — for once, really concentrating — when she comes into my room and throws bits of colored paper on my desk.

[50] "What is this?" she asks. "8.5? 9.1? 10? 'I'd do you!'"

Cat's performance Post-Its lie there looking defeated, having been crumpled and then smoothed out again. Mom's hair is bigger than usual, and suddenly I feel my own stand up at the back of my neck, as if some gene of hers has just decided to assert itself, to remind me whose daughter I am.

"You go through my trash?"

Mom blinks a couple times and stands up straight, as if she has been asked a difficult theoretical question. In that moment of triumph, I feel my chest expand and my eyebrows rise a fraction of an inch — this, too, is an expression of hers. The shock of reacting like her twice in twenty seconds makes me look away, and by the time I look back, she is pretending that she hasn't heard me at all.

"I don't want you around that girl anymore," she says quietly.

[55] When I realize she is talking about Cat, my face grows hot. I think of all the words I could use to say how I'm feeling now: irate, livid, incensed. I am one adjective away from bellicose.²⁰ But they are all too neat to describe the mix of emotions going through me.

"She's my best friend. You don't have a say in it."

Mom blinks at me, leans in.

18. **Delegate (verb):** to assign a task or responsibility to another person

19. **Analogy (noun):** a comparison between two things

20. Irate, livid, incensed, and bellicose are all words that mean "extremely angry."

"You think I've never been wild? You think I've never left through a window? Ask me about the last time I tried to leave through a window."

I stare back and say nothing.

[60] "Ask me."

"Fine. What happened the last time you left through a window?"

"My father caught me. I was on my way to Tiananmen Square for a protest. He locked the window from the outside and pushed two cabinets up against the door to keep me in. By the time he let me out, four of my best friends were dead."

The light from my desk lamp glances off her nose and cheekbones in a way that makes her eyes look darker than usual. Then her lips pull back and her chin bunches up. I have never seen her cry, and the fact that she almost does comes as a surprise. But there is nothing surprising to me about her facial expression of pain. I recognize it in a way that feels congenital,²¹ that must have something to do with bloodlines. Oh, I think. Of course she would look like that.

"It was supposed to be peaceful," she says. "No one ever thought they would open fire on students. When you're young, you think everyone is on your side. You can't imagine everything you have to lose."

[65] It occurs to me then that there are things about my mom that I know without being told or shown. I know them just because I am her daughter. For example, Dad thinks she's haunted by what could have happened to her at Tiananmen Square. But I know that she's just as haunted by the fact that it didn't.

"I'm sorry about your friends," I say.

She fiddles with the Post-Its on my desk, lines them up in a row. She looks suddenly worn — the exact opposite of her expression from that old photo taken in front of the school. One by one, Mom gathers the bits of paper back up into her palm. She doesn't look at me again until she's at the door. "Time for sleep," she says. "Tonight, rest is your first priority."²²

The school parking lot is filled with parents and kids passing books, pencils, and calculators between them. My parents stand on the lawn facing the entrance, staring over my shoulder at the registration table.

"I'm OK now," I say, starting to back away.

[70] Mom has forgotten to change out of her flip-flops when leaving the house, and her toes are clenched away from the morning dew.

"You see, honey? She's fine." Dad tugs the flashcards out of her hands. After they send me off, they are headed to the Ritz Diner for brunch with some of the other nervous parents. I feel bad for Dad. I picture him sitting there, one hand cupping a mug of Lipton tea, the other working the worry out of Mom's fingers.

21. **Congenital (adjective):** having a trait that is present from birth or inherited from your parents

22. **Priority (noun):** something that is more important than other things

As she turns to look at me, her brows separate and her nostrils flare. This is her “pep talk” face. She wore it on my first day of ninth grade, and the time I refused to submerge my head during a YMCA swimming lesson, and the time I stood five terrifying feet from my bedroom door, its handle connected to my tooth by a string. Despite her exposure to motivational posters, Mom’s pep talks never fail to sound like eulogies.²³

“I have to go,” I say before she can begin.

Mom nods and reaches over to give my arm a squeeze. In that moment, she suddenly looks at me differently, and I look back at her differently. I can’t say what’s changed, except that it reminds me of an online test that’s supposed to tell you whether you’re more left-brained or right-brained.²⁴ There is an image of a dancing girl, and whichever direction you see her turning indicates the way you think. Usually, you can only see her going one way, but occasionally a collection of nerves relaxes in your mind — you become not so you, and then the dancer starts to spin the other way. Something just as delicate is turning between my mother and me. It has been there all along, but for the first time in a long time, we are watching it go in the same direction.

[75] “If you mess up, you can always take it again in June,” she says.

So then we’re back to normal.

Here’s the verbal analogy I’ve come up with: The SAT is to my future as my future is to Mom’s past. The outcome of the first will inform how we feel about the second, even though these connections seem **tenuous** at best.

If it will make her happy, I will play by these rules. I will suffer the security procedure required — hand over my calculator, my admission ticket, my two IDs. I will write down the codes they assign, bubble in the letters that spell out my name. I am prepared to fly through the verbal sections, pick off math problems in order of difficulty, and rediagram the ones that give me trouble the first time around. I will tell X from Y. I will assign value to all the unknowns.

But after we hand in our papers, while everyone is heading toward the front exit, where the parents are waiting, I will leave through the back. I will run down the empty halls, my fingers trailing along the locker gills, and blast through the gymnasium, out past those heavy doors. There will be no one there except for Cat, waiting at the curb, spinning one bike pedal with her foot. “Get in front,” I’ll tell her, even though I’m blind with sunshine. “I’ll drive.”

[80] We avoid the main roads, ride along side streets and through empty elementary-school playgrounds. We cut between two lawns at the end of my cul-de-sac and cross a wooden bridge. Speed picks up as we come down the road — we’re holding on with four hands, and then two hands, and then none. At the entrance to the bike trail, our tires snag on a branch, launching us into the air, but Cat’s weight on the handlebars keeps our course when we land.

“Stunning performance!” she shouts over her shoulder. “Ten out of ten!”

23. **Eulogy (noun):** a speech that praises someone who has died

24. People who are logical and like order are considered “right-brained”; people who are creative and artistic are considered “left-brained.”

In my bag are a toothbrush and a change of clothes. We are not sure where we're going yet, but we have always wanted to see MTV Studios in New York City. We have dreams of getting on a bus bound for Port Authority and joining the crowd at Times Square. There are neon signs we will wave, cheers we will yell in hopes of being let up to Total Request Live. Cat keeps reminding me how much trouble I'll be in when we get back, but I'm not scared of getting in trouble. What I'm scared of is growing up to be scared. She ducks forward so I can pedal standing, to gain momentum.²⁵ For one wild moment, as we hurl through the woods, I think I see my mom's face streak between the trees alongside us, trying to keep up.

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25. **Momentum (noun):** the force of something that is in motion

1. Which terms best describe how the narrator perceives her mother?
 - a. thoughtful and empathetic
 - b. relaxed and approachable
 - c. fearful and controlling
 - d. distant and uncaring

2. What does the narrator hide from her mom?
 - a. She hides that she earned a spot in the school play.
 - b. She hides that she is breaking the rules.
 - c. She hides that she failed a test.
 - d. She hides her musical talent.

3. What was her mother's experience with exams in China?
 - a. The exam results determined a person's future.
 - b. The exam results were rigged by the government.
 - c. The exam results influenced a parent's status in the community.
 - d. The exam results were viewed as guides to help students improve.

4. How does the narrator feel about her mother's life in China?
 - a. Proud
 - b. Annoyed
 - c. Uninterested
 - d. Disconnected

5. How does the narrator wish her mother was different?
 - a. She wishes her mom was not so uptight.
 - b. She wishes her mom paid attention to her.
 - c. She wishes her mom gave her more support.
 - d. She wishes her mom took life more seriously.

6. How does the narrator wish her mother was different?
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 - b. She wishes her mom paid attention to her.
 - c. She wishes her mom gave her more support.
 - d. She wishes her mom took life more seriously.

7. How is the narrator's mother different from Cat's mother?
 - a. Cat's mother tries to control her children.
 - b. Cat's mother gives her children freedom.
 - c. Cat's mother is best friends with her children.
 - d. Cat's mother has unrealistic expectations for her children.

8. What does the narrator's mother find?
 - a. the post-it notes from the narrator's after-school TV hangouts
 - b. proof that the narrator has been sneaking out of the house
 - c. evidence that the narrator has been cheating on her tests
 - d. secret notes the narrator passed to people during class

9. What does the narrator learn about her mother's "wild" past?
 - a. Her mother's rebellion came with greater risks.
 - b. Her mother struggled to communicate with her parents.
 - c. Her mother dreamed of leaving China from a young age.
 - d. Her mother's experience inspired her to keep fighting against injustice.

10. What changes between the narrator and her mother?
 - a. They both want to make the other one proud.
 - b. They seem to understand each other for the first time.
 - c. The narrator now agrees with her mother's focus on the SAT.
 - d. The mother now believes she has been too harsh with the narrator.

11. What does the narrator learn from her mother?
 - a. She learns how important it is to plan and prepare for the future.
 - b. She learns how important it is to not let fear control her life.
 - c. She learns how a sense of security can make life easier.
 - d. She learns the value and importance of structure in life.

12. What judgement is the narrator making when she observes that her mother has "become so small in her living of life"? (Paragraph 28)
 - a. The narrator thinks less of her mother because she did not attend an American university.
 - b. The narrator thinks less of her mother because she is too rigid and does not take risks.
 - c. The narrator thinks less of her mother because she is too focused on what other people think.
 - d. The narrator thinks less of her mother because she does not communicate with her husband or daughter.

13. In paragraphs 19-29, how does the narrator's conversation with her dad influence the way she views her mother?
 - a. The conversation causes her to challenge her dad's description of her mother as fearless.
 - b. The conversation causes her to believe that she will never live up to her mother's standards.
 - c. The conversation causes her to be curious about how her mother changed from fearless to fearful.
 - d. The conversation causes her to wonder what could have motivated her mother to become an activist.

14. How does the Tiananmen Square experience affect the way the narrator's mother lives her life? (Paragraphs 58-64)
- It causes her to follow the rules in an attempt to stay safe.
 - It causes her to speak out and use her anger to fight against injustice.
 - It causes her to want to give her own child the freedom she did not have.
 - It causes her to honor the friends she lost by sharing their stories of courage.
15. Which detail from the story best demonstrates how learning about her mother's past affects the narrator?
- "I feel bad for Dad. I picture him sitting there, one hand cupping a mug of Lipton tea, the other working the worry out of Mom's fingers." (Paragraph 71)
 - "Mom nods and reaches over to give my arm a squeeze. In that moment, she suddenly looks at me differently" (Paragraph 74)
 - "There will be no one there except for Cat, waiting at the curb, spinning one bike pedal with her foot. 'Get in front,' I'll tell her, even though I'm blind with sunshine. 'I'll drive.'" (Paragraph 79)
 - "Cat keeps reminding me how much trouble I'll be in when we get back, but I'm not scared of getting in trouble. What I'm scared of is growing up to be scared." (Paragraph 82)

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Cost of Prison in Dollars and Lives

By Michael Jacobsen
2014

In this opinion piece, Michael Jacobsen discusses juvenile justice and how young offenders should be treated in comparison to adult offenders.

- [1] Children and adults are different, a fact the law routinely recognizes when juveniles are prohibited from buying beer or casting a vote. Indeed, family and juvenile courts were created more than a century ago with the understanding that children who had broken the law were less responsible and less culpable¹ than adults. This insight affirms what every parent knows: children often lack the maturity to make sound choices rooted in good judgment.



"Handcuffed criminal" by niu niu is licensed under CC0

Yet in recent years, many states have decided to sentence more children to the longer periods of incarceration normally reserved for adults, especially for serious and violent crimes. That impulse may be understandable in many ways. But to treat children as adults contravenes² both timeless parental wisdom and an improved understanding of youth development and brain functioning.

Recent developments in neuroscience, for example, suggest that teenagers are neither competent to stand trial under the same circumstances as adults nor as blameworthy for their actions. Studies have confirmed significant age-related differences in cognitive processing affecting adolescents' ability to make sound judgments.

In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed, outlawing the death penalty for anyone younger than 18, saying that "from a moral standpoint it would be misguided to equate the failings of a minor with those of an adult, for a greater possibility exists that a minor's character deficiencies will be reformed."

- [5] Still, if treating juveniles as adults in the criminal justice system proved effective, a more convincing argument could be made for the practice. But the evidence doesn't support it. Studies comparing the recidivism³ rates of youth processed in the juvenile system with those handled in the adult system indicate that youth processed in the adult system are likely to re-offend more quickly and at higher rates. Moreover, studies show that a criminal conviction and incarceration have long-term adverse social, educational and economic effects on youth, and that community-based supervision and treatment are, except for the highest-risk kids, far more successful and appropriate for juveniles.

1. **Culpable (adjective):** deserving blame
 2. **Contravene (verb):** to conflict with something
 3. the tendency for a convicted criminal to reoffend

We know that overpunishing kids who do not pose a risk to public safety will actually increase their likelihood of committing crime. Thus for years, taxpayers have been paying huge amounts of money to create a public safety problem that could have been easily avoided — at a fraction of the cost.

For too long, we have defaulted⁴ to incarceration as a way to respond to all manner of adolescent behavior. It has been a misguided, expensive and harmful policy.

*["The Cost of Prison in Dollars and Lives"](#) from *The New York Times* by Michael Jacobsen. Copyright © 2014 by The New York Times Company. Used by permission of Publisher. All rights reserved.*

4. to select something automatically or without the necessary consideration

1. Recently, many state courts have...
 - a. considered the young age of offenders when the crimes are violent.
 - b. given juveniles the minimum sentence because of their age.
 - c. punished juveniles more harshly than adults to discourage repeat offenses.
 - d. sentenced juveniles like adults, despite their young age.

2. According to the author, why shouldn't juveniles receive the same punishment as adults?
 - a. Juveniles don't realize when they're doing something wrong.
 - b. Juveniles suffer more in prison than adult offenders do.
 - c. Juveniles are young and still have much to contribute to society.
 - d. Juveniles' brains aren't fully developed and they can be rehabilitated.

3. Sentencing juveniles as adults...
 - a. negatively impacts youth and wastes money.
 - b. helps them realize the severity of their crime.
 - c. destroys their trust in the justice system.
 - d. frightens juveniles away from reoffending.

4. Culpable most nearly means
 - a. the tendency for a convicted criminal to reoffend
 - b. conflict with something
 - c. select something automatically or without the necessary consideration
 - d. deserving blame

5. Recidivism most nearly means
 - a. the tendency for a convicted criminal to reoffend
 - b. conflict with something
 - c. select something automatically or without the necessary consideration
 - d. deserving blame

6. Contravene most nearly means
 - a. the tendency for a convicted criminal to reoffend
 - b. conflict with something
 - c. select something automatically or without the necessary consideration
 - d. deserving blame

7. Defaulted most nearly means
 - a. the tendency for a convicted criminal to reoffend
 - b. conflict with something
 - c. select something automatically or without the necessary consideration
 - d. deserving blame

8. The central idea of the text is: Treating juvenile offenders as adults has been ineffective, wasteful, and unresponsive to what is known about adolescent brain development. Which piece of evidence supports this statement?
- “Children and adults are different, a fact the law routinely recognizes when juveniles are prohibited from buying beer or casting a vote.” (Paragraph 1)
 - “Yet in recent years, many states have decided to sentence more children to the longer periods of incarceration normally reserved for adults, especially for serious and violent crimes.” (Paragraph 2)
 - “Studies comparing the recidivism rates of youth processed in the juvenile system with those handled in the adult system indicate that youth processed in the adult system are likely to re—offend more quickly and at higher rates.” (Paragraph 5)
 - “For too long, we have defaulted to incarceration as a way to respond to all manner of adolescent behavior.” (Paragraph 7)
9. Which of the following best describes the author’s purpose in the text?
- to explore both sides of the debate regarding sentencing juveniles as adults
 - to show how treating juvenile offenders as adults is ineffective
 - to emphasize why juvenile offenders are more likely to be rehabilitated
 - to stress how the criminal justice system is a burden on taxpayers
10. How does paragraph 5 contribute to development of the central idea of the text?
- It suggests that juvenile offenders face more obstacles in prison than adult offenders.
 - It explains that juvenile offenders are harmed rather than helped when sentenced as adults.
 - It stresses how some juvenile offenders respond positively to adult sentences, while others do not.
 - It gives an example of a juvenile who was sentenced as an adult and never able to reintegrate into society.