

# [He conduct of their friends and neighbours](https://assignbuster.com/he-conduct-of-their-friends-and-neighbours/)

He was warned, for instance, against extrava­gance by being shown the miserable state to which that fault had reduced some well-known character of the day.

His father found no difficulty in pointing out among the Romans of his time im­pressive examples of the evil consequences of each of the vices from which he wished to deter his son. But the commoner way of teaching by example is by giving in one’s own conduct a good example for others to follow. As a rule, men are very like sheep, and inclined to imitate the conduct of their friends and neighbours without considering whether the example is good or bad. It is on this account that example is better than precept. However excellent may be the moral sentiments we enunciate, they are not likely to produce the least effect unless we are seen to carry them out in practice. Men are much more ready to imitate our actions than to be persuaded by our words, so that, if our words and actions disagree, the latter have far more influence than the former. It is the great power of example that makes the choice of friends and companions such an important matter. A young man who has imprudently made bad friends is likely to be led astray by their bad example, even though his reason shows him clearly the folly of their conduct.

Fortunately a good example is just as powerful as a bad example in influencing conduct. Many have been inspired to noble deeds by reading the lives of great men in history and fiction. The specimens of Greek and Roman virtue given in Plutarch Lives have had a great influence on many generations of readers. Books like Smiles’ Self-help and Character produce an excellent effect by giving striking examples of every kind of virtue and excellence from the lives of eminent men.

Nor is the effect produced by the imaginary characters described by writers of fiction to be left out of consideration. Stories full of the exploits of brigands and murderers have been known to induce foolish boys to commence a life of crime. Other boys have been tempted to run away to sea by the stories they have read of the wonderful adventures of sailors in foreign lands. There is no doubt that the feeling of admiration for the gallery of noble men and women depicted in Shakespeare’s plays and in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, has sunk deep into the heart of the English nation, and exercised a beneficial influence on the national character. But, after all, living examples are more powerful for good or evil than those found in history and fiction.

We ought, therefore, to be deterred from folly, not merely by its evil consequences to ourselves, but also by the consideration that, however humble our position in life may be. The example given by our conduct is sure to exercise some influence on the lives of others. The knowledge of this fact is an incentive to right conduct that has great weight with all who have any care for the well-being of their fellow-men.