

Decision Making

The Foundation for Responsible Behavior

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Working with the Young Child: Ages 4 - 8

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Letting go helps children prepare for independent living. Youngsters gradually take more responsibility for themselves and their actions. This task is one of the hardest that parents of school-age children face.

Parent-child involvement changes when children enter school. Rather than actively doing things for their children, the *parents' role is to help the children do things for themselves.*

The basic developmental tasks facing the family of the school-age child are:

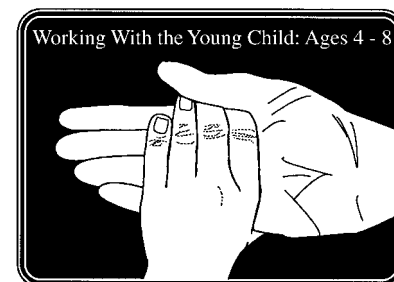
- adjusting to the child's expanding world
- letting the child go
- recognizing the child's readiness for greater responsibility and independent decision making,
- helping the child learn values, and
- encouraging a positive self-concept.

Children assume these responsibilities when they make decisions. It is these decisions that parents experience conflict. It is hard to let their children learn from their mistakes. This is difficult when we want the "best" for our children and we want them to "succeed." Sometimes the child's choices are correct and result in positive outcomes. Sometimes their decisions are unwise. *Parents find that it is hard to refrain from being overly or under protective.*

Today's children need to make decisions when coping with:

- working parents
- divorce of parents
- frequent moves and the loss of friends and family
- what they see on television
- peer influence

How can we help our children make decisions which are positive and productive?



Let's review what our children are developmentally capable of doing.

The 4- to 7-year-old child is able to solve problems and can give reasons for his choice. These reasons result from what they have observed rather than a learned set of rules.

The 7- to 8-year-old is capable of making logical decisions. These are limited to problems involving "real" world situations. This is when your child begins to think more like an adult than a child.

"I need to wear a coat so I won't get cold."

School-age children realize that their way of thinking is not the only way. They are now able to appreciate situations from the point of view of other people.

As children's brains develop, their ability to reason also develops. Rules serve as important guidelines for the behavior of 6- to 7-year-olds. Children younger than age 7 generally consider rules to be unchanging. They believe rules are developed by adults and require no explanation. Therefore, rules should always be obeyed. When an adult and a child hold conflicting opinions, the majority of 6- or 7-year-olds feel the adult is right.

Every event has a reason and the reason usually involves them. Thus, 6- and 7-year-olds are likely to believe that accidents and misfortunes are punishment for their own misbehavior.

"If I had obeyed mother, I wouldn't have lost my jacket."

Children in this age group also blame themselves for any abuse they receive from their parents. They reason that they must have been bad and deserved the punishment; otherwise, their parents wouldn't have had to hurt them.

What skills are needed to make decisions?

- active listening — to really hear what the person is saying
- empathy — to understand what the person is feeling
- negotiation — to “give and take” when solving problems
- know what the limits are
- support for the decision -- once the decision is made, all people will comply.

What is the decision making process?

1. **Define the problem.** This must be clearly understood so that the proposed solution will work.
2. **Brainstorm possible solutions.** Everyone involved adds their ideas. All ideas are respected.
3. **Consider the consequences** of each possible solution.
4. **Select a solution** which seems best and put it into action.
5. **Evaluate** your decision to see how well the solution you chose has ‘solved’ the problem.
6. If the first choice did not result in the outcome you had hoped, if possible, select a second solution.

Suggestion: Use the decision making steps to discuss “WHAT IF” questions with your children:

1. You get lost in the store.
2. A stranger offers a ride.
3. Your friends want to play with a gun.

As you and your child discuss these “what if” situations, many possible solutions with the appropriate consequences will result.

Note: As you provide input, tell your child what they *can* do rather than what they **cannot** do. Your child will feel he has even more privileges!

Example

1. If you get lost in the store, what could happen?

You could find someone who can help you find me.

I could wait at the place where I lost you and maybe you would come back to find me.

This allows you to state your feelings (“I care about you”) and your values (“Safety is important”). This not only clarifies family beliefs, but it provides direction for your child.



Though children begin to learn simple family rules when they are about one year old, it is during the elementary school period that they embrace family and social values.

Why is it important for you to provide this input? You are your child’s first and best teacher. You are the one who needs to teach your child values.

- Decisions are made based on values.

Example: I value people who tell the truth because I can trust them.

- Goals result from these decisions.

Example: I will tell the truth so that I can be trusted.

- A child’s behavior is based on decisions.

Example: The child tells the truth and is trusted.

How will my child benefit from learning to make decisions?

Decision making helps children take responsibility for their own actions. When children believe they are competent and capable, their self-esteem is strengthened.

Decision making helps children solve their problems in a considerate, mutually satisfying way. It encourages the formation of close relationships without fear of domination. This is especially important when peers become more involved in our children’s lives.

Decision making stimulates the mind as new ideas and answers are explored. Children become more creative as they see more choices.

It is important that you understand: decision making encourages thinking.

Children who live with **dictated** moral rules seldom think about the reasons for the rules they follow.

Children who are encouraged to **reason and to have explanation for these reasons** are more likely to develop moral judgments which lead to highly self-controlled behavior.

What kinds of decisions can children make?

Decisions about personal issues: “Do you want to color with crayons or colored pencils? Would you like to wear your pink blouse or your blue blouse?”

Decisions about family issues: Family rules e.g., time for bed, length of phone calls, morning routines, homework and family work responsibilities, and any other activities which help your family run smoothly.

When decisions meet the needs of other people, children see themselves as having a meaningful impact on other people. In this way, decision making continues to enhance self-esteem.

How can I provide encouragement as my children make these decisions — especially when “poor” decisions are made?

Typically, they experience greater success and recover more quickly when they know their parents support them and believe in their capabilities. When parents help them understand WHAT can be learned from the experience, children *and* parents can then accept these as opportunities for learning!

Child: “I didn’t know a thing in my math class. I know I failed my test today.”

A parent might ask: What makes you think you failed? What does failure mean? What didn’t you understand? What can you do to learn the information? How can I help? What did you learn from this experience? How can you use this information in the future?

Summary

Children become more capable when they experience the pride of making a contribution. Being part of the family is one way they can gain this experience.

By involving your child in the decision making process, you will see greater cooperation, collaboration, positive motivation, and a healthier self-esteem.

Resources

Child Development, A. Christine Harris, West Publishing Co., 1986.

Positive Discipline for Single Parents, Jane Nelsen, Prima Publishing, 1994.

Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World, Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelsen, Prima Publishing 1989.

Working with the Early Adolescent curriculum, “Decision Making” section.

“Working with the Young Child: Ages 4–8” is a series of six bulletins authored by Arizona Cooperative Extension Family Task Force members. The bulletins cover the same major topics found in “Understanding Youth: Working with the Early Adolescent” curriculum, but address younger children.

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