

### How Can we Prepare Our Children to Make Responsible Choices?

"I don't even like playing anymore, but all of my friends are joining the team again," my frustrated 12-year-old sighs. He has played baseball with the same kids for the past five years, cultivating special friendships along the way. Each year the coaches, parents, and players have become more competitive and so has the pressure of playing. My son's enjoyment of the game has decreased as the emphasis on performance has increased. Now, he is faced with the challenging decision to either continue playing because his friends expect him to or follow his own interests and motivation elsewhere. This is a tough decision for a young person.

Children are just developing the skills to make decisions on their own. They grow from basing decisions on chance with games like "Rock, Paper, Scissors" to weighing pros and cons like whether to rejoin a baseball team that has grown stressful. Then in the teen years, youth face tempting risks like whether to follow peer pressure and try alcohol despite the fact that most parents disapprove of underage drinking. Children increasingly have to decide when to accommodate friends, when to assert their own needs, when to prioritize concern for others, and how to think ahead to consequences that may result from their actions.

Young children rely on adults to establish and enforce rules. Their main concerns revolve around their own safety and secure attachment to their parents or those in a parenting role and educators. Around age nine, children become more aware of others, and their social relationships become priority. They invent their own rules with peers through games. They weigh social values when making decisions like belonging to a friend group, contributing to a team, or meeting parent and teacher expectations. This new level of decision making is assisted by their emerging ability to see from others' perspectives. Empathy is a skill that requires a lot of practice. We can help by offering our own empathy for our children's feelings.

Children do not automatically associate their actions with a reaction, yet authentic responsible decision making requires this consequential thinking. Teaching responsible decision making involves preparing children for future independence and big decisions by offering many opportunities for making small choices now. Our children's brain development will not solidify to rational, logical thinking until their mid-twenties, so the ongoing practice of little choices helps strengthen their neural connections.

Here are some developmentally appropriate ways to help prepare your child for making responsible decisions.

**0-5-Year-Olds: Offer frequent, limited, authentic choices.** Young children are working to master many everyday life skills like getting dressed or putting away toys. Parents can become frustrated as a child refuses their help asserting, "I can do it myself!" Rather than getting sucked into a power struggle, why not offer your child a sense of control, the chance to exercise their burgeoning skills, and practice making small choices? Be sure the options you offer are acceptable to you so that the choice is a legitimate one for them. Even the most mundane of options – "Would you like to pick up the blocks or the books" – can bring a sense of agency and motivation to your young child.

**5-7-Year-Olds: Become informed and establish rules together.** As children are learning the rules of school, it is a perfect opportunity to discuss the rules at home as well. What are important values for your family? Keep it simple and positive. "People before screens" is a favorite in many families. Become informed together about why screen time should be limited -- how it impacts a child's growing brain. Research and learn together, and then create rules together.

**8-10-Year-Olds: Learn about social justice and fairness issues.** Children this age have raised social awareness, so it is an ideal time to introduce them to issues of fairness around the world. Why are some people treated unfairly because of learning differences, race, faith, or mate preference? How can we reflect on these issues expanding our children's circle of concern? How can we guide them to act with compassion since they clearly have the desire?

11-14-Year-Olds: **Follow through on repairing harm.** Children learn by making mistakes, but sometimes their choices harm others. Whether hurt feelings or a broken toy, children need to learn to repair the harm they have caused to learn responsibility. Children may naturally react by shying away from the person they have harmed, hoping that time will cure all. This is when parental support is critical. We can help them follow through by mending a broken fence or by offering a sincere apology. If we assign punishment such as, “You are grounded!” or “No iPad for a week,” we miss the opportunity to teach the natural real-world outcomes that exist.

Find more at [ParentingMontana.org](https://www.ParentingMontana.org).

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