

How Can we Prepare Our Children to Make Responsible Choices?

"I don't like playing anymore, but all my friends are joining the team again," relays my eleven-year-old son, Ethan, voicing his debate over whether to commit to another season of baseball. He has played for a number of years cultivating valuable friendships along the way. But, as he's grown, the coaches, parents, and kids alike have become more competitive. And so too has the pressure. E has enjoyed the game less as the emphasis on performance has increased. This spring, he was faced with the challenging decision: Do I continue to do something I've always done because my friends expect me to or do I follow my interests and motivation?

Children are at the very beginning stages of developing decision-making skills. They grow from basing decisions on chance with games like "Rock, Paper, Scissors" or "Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe" to weighing pros and cons like whether to rejoin a baseball team that's grown stressful. Then, in the teen years, youth face tempting risks like whether to follow peer pressure to try alcohol despite the fact that most parents -- as confirmed in a recent survey of Montana parents -- disapprove of underage drinking. Children will increasingly have to decide when to accommodate friends, when to assert their needs, when to show care for others, and when and how they should think ahead about consequences that might result from their actions.

Young children rely on adults to establish and enforce the rules. Their central concern focuses on their own safety and secure attachment to their parents and educators. But, by the age of nine, children move to the next stage of moral development in which the care of others and their social relationships takes priority. This is also a time when children begin inventing their own rules among their peers through games. They weigh social values when decision making like belonging to a friend group, contributing to a team, or meeting parent and teacher expectations.


This new level of decision making is aided by the fact that children gain the ability to see from others' perspectives. This empathy is a skill that requires lots of practice. You may hear your child trying to read others' minds but not exactly hitting the mark with their inferences. "Wendy stared at me in the hallway. My hair must look so weird today." But actually Wendy was consumed with her own worries. She was staring aimlessly lost in her thoughts, not taking notice of your daughter's hair.

We can help by offering our own empathy for our child's feelings and questioning negative perceptions. "I hear you're feeling upset that she disapproved of your hair. Are you sure? Could it be that she was just having a bad day?"

Children around eight years old also gain the added decision-making support of self-talk. Though we, as adults, may view that inner voice as a way to criticize ourselves for our imperfections, in fact, it serves a critical self-regulating role. Instead of a child requiring a mom to warn her not to go near a hot fire, your child begins to tell herself "Danger! Don't go near the fire," and guiding herself. She's learned from years of hearing your warnings, and whether or not you are present to guide her, it's been internalized. This is why our eights, nines, and tens seem more competent and trustworthy. Their internal warning system has been turned on, and they have enough life experience to help them avoid danger and make positive choices.

What does it mean to teach our children responsible decision making? The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning defines it as "the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on considerations of ethical standards, safety concerns, the realistic evaluation of the consequences that stem from actions and the wellbeing of self and others." Children do not automatically connect their actions to a reaction. Yet, authentic responsible decision making requires consequential thinking. Preparing our children for independence in future years will require us to offer them numerous small chances to make decisions so that they are ready for the big choices to come. In fact, our children's brain development will not solidify the rational, logical thinking required of the adult years until they are in their early to mid twenties, so our ongoing practice of little choices helps strengthen those neural connections.

So, how can we prepare our children at any age to make responsible decisions? Here are some suggestions:



3-5-Year-Olds:

Offer frequent, limited, authentic choices. Young children are working on mastering numerous everyday life tasks like getting shoes on or putting toys away though they are not yet fully competent. These can add up to daily frustrations as a child refuses help while asserting “I can do it myself!” Instead of getting sucked into daily power struggles, why not offer your child a sense of control, the chance to exercise their burgeoning skills as well as gain valuable practice in making small choices? Be certain both options are acceptable to you so that the choice is truly theirs to make. The most mundane of options — “Do you want to pick up the lego set or books?” — can offer your young child a sense of agency and the motivation to go with it. So, think twice before you go ahead and grab the pink socks. Instead, discover the power of offering, “Will it be pink or red today? You choose.”



5-7-Year-Olds:

Become informed and establish rules together. As children are learning the rules of school, it's a perfect opportunity to discuss home rules. What are some important principles your family values? Keep it simple and positive — what to do, not what not to do. “People before screens” is a favorite in our family. Then, as you go about your everyday life, talk about how it applies. When friend Aidan comes to the door to play, we turn off screens and take advantage of the play opportunity. Also, get into the habit of becoming informed together. Why should you limit screen time? Do you know how unlimited screen time can impact a child's growing brain? Research and learn together. Then, create rules collaboratively. Your child will learn that in order to make responsible decisions, it's important to become informed first and learn the relevant facts.



8-10-year-olds:

Learn about social justice and fairness issues. In the Highlights State of the Kid survey of 2,000 U.S. kids, ninety-three percent of 6-12-year-olds said they would take action if they saw someone doing or saying something mean. Because of our children's raised social awareness at this age, it's an ideal time to introduce them to issues of fairness around the world. Why are some people treated unfairly because of learning differences, color, creed, or mate preference? How can we reflect on these issues expanding our children's circle of concern? And, how can we guide them to act with compassion since clearly they have the desire? Begin in your home community by identifying areas of need and working as a family to find ways to act with kindness, to include those who are excluded, and to serve others in need.



11-14-year-olds:

Follow through on repairing harm. Children make mistakes in order to learn, and sometimes those choices can harm others. Whether it's hurt feelings or a broken toy, in order to learn responsibility our children need to repair the harm they've caused. Our children might naturally react by shying away from the person they've harmed, hoping that time will cure all. That's why our support is critical. How can we help them follow through by mending a broken fence or by offering a sincere apology? If we assign a punishment such as, "Go to your room! You're grounded!" Or "No iPad for a week," we miss the opportunity to teach the natural, real world outcomes of their behavior that always exist if we pay attention. How will our child learn consequential thinking when we teach them that breaking a neighbor's china teacup equates to no iPad for a week? Our angry child will come to the conclusion that we are simply trying to cause them pain. They cannot see any logical connection because there isn't one. Instead you might say, "You broke Mrs. Jackson's teacup when you were throwing the ball in the house. How do you think you could repair it as well as the relationship with Mrs. Jackson?" If their idea is safe and reasonable, support it by guiding alongside them as they follow through on actions and words to repair harm caused.

If you help your child reflect thoughtfully on their choices, you'll create a habit that will serve them for a lifetime. Discuss what their highest priorities are and how this choice does or does not align with them. Share your own family values and how they impact your decision making. Most importantly, project ahead to the future. If you choose to play on the team, how will you feel in August at your final game — happy or burned out? As parents, we frequently face the most challenging decisions of our lives in raising our children to be confident, compassionate, and independent future adults. As we guide our children to practice taking responsibility through their everyday choices, we take essential steps toward that greater goal.

About The Author:

Jennifer Miller, M.Ed., author of the popular site, Confident Parents, Confident Kids, has twenty years of experience helping adults become more effective with the children they love through social and emotional learning. Among other roles, she serves as lead writer for ParentingMontana.org, a project that provides easy to use parenting tools to support a child's success from kindergarten through the teen years.



This product was supported [in part] by CFDA 93.959 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of SAMHSA or Health and Human Services.