

About good decision-making

Children as well as adults make decisions every day

Even young children regularly choose how they will behave, which toys or games they would like to play with, which books they would like to have read to them, or which television shows they would like to watch. As they get older children make bigger decisions that often involve their family, their friends and their schoolwork. The kinds of decisions children make affect their wellbeing, their relationships and their success.

Children learn skills for making good decisions gradually. Parents, carers and school staff can help children learn how to make good decisions by providing effective guidance and supporting them as they practise.

How decision-making skills develop

Children's decision making is strongly influenced by the expectations and values they learn from those around them. This occurs through observing others (particularly those close to them), hearing about and discussing values, and having opportunities to make decisions and experience their consequences. Though young children have some skills for making decisions, they do not yet have the experience to understand and decide about the complex situations that adults must deal with. Developing skills for logical thinking and problem-solving supports children's growing abilities for effective decision-making. As children develop skills for managing their thinking as well as their feelings, they become better at putting decisions into practice and at keeping them on track. For example, children who have learned to use thinking to manage their behaviour are able to say to themselves, "Stop, I'd better think about this first." The ability to think before acting helps children control impulsive behaviour and make better decisions. Being able to think about time and plan ahead provides a basis for children to evaluate options by considering long-term goals, not just immediate circumstances. The table below shows some ways that children's developing thinking skills help them learn to make decisions and solve problems.

Younger children are more likely to...	As they develop, children are more able to...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on one aspect of a situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see things from different angles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on their own position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see other people's points of view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • look for immediate benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • think ahead and plan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • want things now 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on longer range goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • act without thinking first 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make simple distinctions between good/bad, right/wrong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apply more complex values to their own thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make decisions based on a whim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use reasoned strategies for making decisions

What's involved in making decisions

The key skills for decision-making are: identifying when a decision needs to be made, thinking of possible options, evaluating the options, and choosing strategies for making the decision and reviewing how it works. A simple situation, such as deciding what to have for breakfast, can demonstrate these skills in action.

1 Identify decision

What to have for breakfast

Choice may be based on:

- What do I feel like?
- What looks good?
- What's healthy?

2 Think of options

- Cereal – sweetened, processed or natural, unsweetened
- Toast – with jam or vegemite
- Fruit – fresh or cooked in syrup
- Milk – plain or flavoured

Options may be limited by:

- What's available
- What child is used to
- What child is willing to try
- Choices parent/carer allows

3 Evaluate options

- Sweetened cereal tastes better but is not so healthy
- Plain milk is healthier but child doesn't like the taste

Consider the relevance of things like:

- Pleasure (taste)
- What's quick and easy?
- What's healthiest?

4 Choose a strategy, try it and check how it works

For example:

- Try and compare taste
- Choose what's quickest ...or
- Compare listed ingredients for nutritional value
- How good was your decision?
- Did you enjoy breakfast?
- Did you achieve goals (eg for being quick, for healthy eating)?
- How will you decide next time?

Guiding their decisions

Younger children are unlikely to think through a decision about something like breakfast options very carefully. They are more likely to respond at a simple level to preferences such as taste or the way the food looks. Parents and carers can guide children's decision-making by limiting the choices they make available. They can also explain the values that guide their decisions. For example, a parent or carer could say, "Let's buy this cereal because it has lots of healthy things in it."

Making the reasons for your decisions clear and providing a choice between two acceptable options can be helpful for guiding children's choices, for example: "It's not a good idea to start that game right now because your friend will be going home soon. You could play a quick card game or go outside and play ball." By explaining the reasons for your decisions you also help children learn the kinds of values you want them to use as they become more able to make decisions for themselves, for example: "I know you would like to go out with your friend. But we agreed that we would see your cousins today and they are looking forward to it. They would be very disappointed if you didn't arrive."

What can get in the way of making good decisions?

Having the skills for thinking through decisions makes a good decision more likely, but it doesn't guarantee one. Other things can get in the way. For example, strong feelings can cloud clear thinking. So when a child is frightened, angry or overwhelmed by strong feelings the chances of making a good decision are reduced. Having skills for managing feelings can help children to calm down and make better decisions.

Some children have impulsive temperaments and find learning to think through their behaviour a particular challenge. These children especially benefit from learning skills that help them to think before they act. Certain kinds of thinking can also interfere with good judgment. It is not uncommon for younger children in particular to be over-confident about their abilities and this can contribute to poor decisions at times. Being competitive can mean children want to prove themselves in front of others and so lead them to make rash decisions. Prejudice or hostility towards particular individuals and poor social skills also contribute to poor social decision-making.

Helping children to make good decisions

A good decision is one that, on balance, is most likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone concerned. Children learn to make good decisions with adult guidance and when given opportunities to practise making decisions for themselves. By talking through the steps for decision-making, adults can help children learn how to think decisions through. They also help them understand the important things they need to consider when making decisions. Take nine year old Zak, for instance, who gets into a panic because of a poor decision. He had completely forgotten about his homework and had gone off to play at a friend's house instead. Now he wants his Grandma to write a note to the teacher because he is worried he will get into trouble at school for not finishing his homework in time. In the example below, Zak's Grandma uses the decision-making steps to help Zak think through his suggestion and come up with a better solution.

Zak:	"I didn't get to do my homework. Will you write a note so I don't have to stay in at lunch time and do it?"	
Grandma:	"Let's think about this problem so we can work out the best solution. What ways can you think of?"	Identifies it as a problem to be solved
Zak:	"You could say I was sick."	
Grandma:	"Can you think of any other ways to try to solve this problem?"	Prompts for options
Zak:	"I could stay home to do it and bring it to school the next day."	
Grandma:	"Really? Do you have any other ideas?"	Prompts for more options
Zak:	"I could try to get up early and get it done before school."	
Grandma:	"That sounds like a possibility. Any more ideas?"	
Zak:	"No."	
Grandma:	"Okay, let's think through what's good and not-so-good about the solutions you've suggested. Which one shall we think about first?"	Asks Zak to evaluate options
Zak:	"I could stay home, but then I will miss sport and I'm supposed to be on the team. Won't you write me a note, Grandma?"	
Grandma:	"So staying home may not be such a good idea, I agree. Do you think it would be fair for me to write a note? Do you think it would be honest to say you were sick?"	Reinforces positive thinking Proposes values to consider
Zak:	"Not really. I guess I can try getting up early to do it. What if I don't have enough time?"	
Grandma:	"Getting up early to get your homework done sounds like a very responsible decision to me. I could wake you up in the morning to make sure you have time."	Encourages and supports responsibility
Zak:	"Okay. Will you wake me up at 6:30 then?"	
Grandma:	"It's a deal. I'll even get your breakfast for you!"	Reinforces good decision-making

To be sure Zak's decision is successful, his Grandma can support him to carry out his plan. After the immediate problem has been solved, Grandma could use similar steps to help Zak think through ways he can avoid having this problem again. Zak will still need adult guidance to come to a decision and keep to it, but he will feel more responsible for his actions and accept guidance more readily when he has been involved in deciding how to manage his homework.



Keys to supporting children's decision-making skills

Provide chances to practise

Teach children the steps for decision-making and practise with them. Remember that children's abilities for making decisions develop with experience and maturity. Start with simple choices and gradually build up to bigger, more complex decisions as their abilities and skills improve.

Support for autonomy

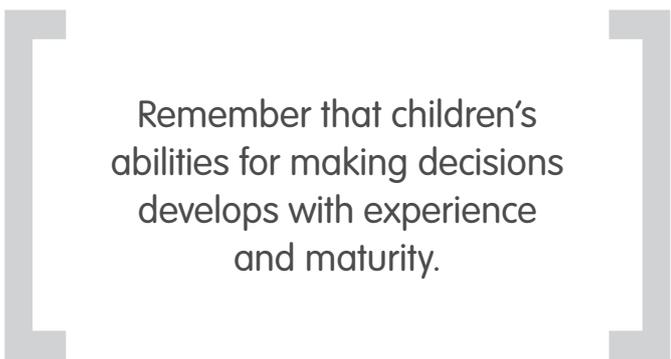
Provide children with structure and input but let them make decisions that are appropriate for their age and level of responsibility. If adults make all the decisions for children or continually override their decisions, children cannot develop the sense of autonomy that is necessary for them to make wise decisions for themselves.

Require responsibility

Provide tasks and expectations that require children to make a meaningful contribution to the family. Getting them to be responsible for feeding pets, looking after their sports gear, managing their pocket money, or regularly doing a particular household chore gives children opportunities to make decisions and demonstrate responsible behaviour.

Teach values

Good decisions are guided by values. Children learn about what to value by example and through discussion. Talking about the positive values you use to make decisions (eg caring, honesty, respect, keeping healthy) provides children with positive models for their own decision-making.



Remember that children's abilities for making decisions develops with experience and maturity.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

