

# Learning to make good decisions and solve problems

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## Skills and qualities for making decisions

There are certain qualities and skills that help children make thoughtful decisions. Parents and carers can help children develop these qualities and skills from birth by supporting the development of their:

- ▶ Self-esteem: to feel ok about themselves even when they go against what their group wants.
- ▶ Confidence: to be able to ask for information they need, to say 'No' or to say what they want.
- ▶ Thinking and reasoning skills: to be able to plan and make thoughtful choices. These come as their brain develops as well as through practise and experience.
- ▶ Problem-solving skills.
- ▶ Communication skills: being able to say what they need and listen to others' viewpoints.
- ▶ Knowledge about issues and consequences: children develop an understanding of consequences over time. When children are very young, parents and carers may need to help children learn what the consequences may be, for example, if you take your jacket you will stay warm when you go outside.
- ▶ Being able to consider and take into account other people's feelings.
- ▶ Ability to manage feelings and behaviour: to be able to wait and think before acting or reacting.

## What does problem solving involve?

Most times, when children are making decisions they will not use all the problem-solving or decision-making skills suggested below. However, by learning these skills, children are able to be more flexible in their problem solving and decision making.

Problem solving involves:

### Managing feelings

If a situation is upsetting, children first need to be aware of and able to manage their feelings. Young children will often need someone to help them say what they are feeling and take some time to be calm.

### Working out what the problem is

At any time we all hear, see and feel many more messages than we can attend to. A child might attend to a message that fits in with their thoughts about themselves, for example, 'I am no good at this', or that fits with something they have been told for example, 'That is not a good thing to do', or that makes them feel good or unhappy, for example, 'I feel scared when someone talks loudly'. The first step is to help the child identify and label their feelings in order to help them understand what the problem is.

Ali and Cameron were fighting over a toy. A staff member in the early childhood service said 'Let me see if I can help you with the problem. I see that Ali, you took the toy train away from Cameron because you wanted a turn with it, is that right? And Cameron, you wanted to keep it because you were busy playing with it, and you were angry because you had it first? So the problem is that two people both want the toy. Cameron feels angry and hurt because Ali took the toy and Ali feels sad because he wants to play with it'. As children get older they will be able to say how they feel themselves.



### Planning to solve the problem

Depending on the age and abilities of the children, solutions may be offered (for toddlers) for example, 'How would it be, Cameron, if you finish your game and then give it to Ali for a turn?' If Cameron chooses to keep the train for a while you could help Ali find something else to do while he waits for a turn. (Because most toddlers are not really able to wait and take turns yet, you might also try to find another train so they can have one each).

If the children are three or older you could say: 'Can you think of some ways we could solve this?' If they can't think of any you could make some suggestions for them to choose from. Think of as many options as you can and then talk about what would happen with each one. Even if options seem unworkable, include them as this encourages children to consider different solutions before choosing what to do next.

Remember that often noticing and commenting on a child's emotion is in itself enough to solve a problem, for example, Cameron is angry and hurt and Ali is sad.

### Doing something about it (action)

Staying nearby might be enough support for children to try to problem solve. Sometimes they will need your help. As they get older, children will be able to do more problem solving themselves and then let you know later how it went.

### Checking back

Ask children about the decision they have made—did it help, did it not help, do you need to find a different way to go? This is important because sometimes children ask an adult to help them with a problem and whatever suggestion they try does not work. If you don't check back and show children how to try again, they may have lost an opportunity to learn or confidence in your ability to help.



**Keep in mind that every aspect of a child's life does not have to be used as an opportunity to learn something. Having fun playing their own games and working out their problems is essential to healthy development.**

### How decision-making skills develop

**When we are helping children to make decisions we need to make sure our expectations fit with what they are able to do.**

Often young children cannot decide what to do without some help from an adult. Very young children can be given simple choices between two things. Parents and carers can put problems into words for the child and offer possible solutions. As children get older and more confident, they are more able to think of ways to solve their problems when they are prompted and later can work them out for themselves without help.



### Babies (birth to around 18 months)

- ▶ Right from the start, babies notice patterns in their lives, such as familiar voices, how faces look and the patterns of people's behaviour.
- ▶ Babies learn they can have an impact on these patterns (e.g., they learn that when they smile, someone smiles back and when they are vocal, someone talks back).
- ▶ Babies need a predictable environment (e.g., if a different person attends to them each time they cry, or sometimes people smile at them and sometimes they look angry, it makes it harder for babies to learn how to respond).

When you hold out two toys to a baby and the baby chooses one, the baby is making a decision. When you offer babies a feed and they turn their head away, they are making a decision.

You can help babies develop their decision-making skills by respecting their need to choose when they can. For example, if they don't like a food, you can offer them something different; if they are upset when you try to leave them you could stay and comfort them. This helps babies build a sense of trust and confidence.

### Toddlers (around 18 months to three years)

- ▶ Really want to make their own decisions and this is a very positive developmental step
- ▶ Are learning they are separate individuals, so this is a very important time to encourage them to make choices
- ▶ Often have difficulty with too many choices because they can't hold many options in their thoughts at once
- ▶ Often like things to be the same and do not respond well to change.

Parents, carers and early childhood staff can encourage toddlers to make their own choices and may avoid saying 'No' more than they have to. A staff member might say 'Yes' to a child who does not want to have morning tea at the same time as the other children because he is busy making something. If parents and carers do have to say 'No', it is helpful to give a simple reason that the child can understand. For example 'No, we can't blow bubbles inside because it will make the floor slippery. But let's blow them outside'.

Offering two choices gives children practice at feeling confident in choosing. You might offer two different shirts to wear, two different toys to choose from, or a choice between a banana or some strawberries.

Sometimes adults can let toddlers learn from making mistakes with choices, as long as they are not harmful. For example, a toddler who wants to experiment with putting their peas in their milk might decide they don't like it. No harm is done; they have learned something and made a decision.

It is beneficial for toddlers to make choices wherever they can, but when there is an issue of physical or emotional safety, it is important that parents or carers take charge. One important choice to give toddlers is about what and how much they eat. This is part of coping with their new world. Like adults, toddlers don't want to eat food they don't like, or to eat when they are not hungry. Getting into conflict about foods is likely to be upsetting for everyone. Providing a variety of foods, including some you know the child likes, and letting them choose gives them an opportunity to make a decision on their own. Providing just a few choices can make it easier for children.



## Preschool children (around three to five years)

- ▶ Are much better able to use words for thinking and expressing what they need
- ▶ Can tell someone about a problem
- ▶ Can wait for some time for something they want
- ▶ Know that their minds are separate from others', that others don't know what they are thinking, have a much better memory, and a better understanding of time than when they were younger.

Preschool children can hold several things in their mind at once, which means they can take into account different things when making decisions. For example, a three-year-old who asks to go to a gym class may know that they enjoy the gym, that there will be other children they like there and their parent or carer will be coming back on time to pick them up.

By the end of the preschool years children have developed many skills that help them to start making decisions on their own. However, their understanding of the world is still limited and they still need the support of parents and carers.

Older preschoolers can often practise problem solving in different ways (e.g., sort out dogs from cats, sort the small horses from big horses). This experience is good practise for other decision making. Preschoolers can remember information they have been given, can use this to think about new situations and are more able to manage their feelings and actions. This helps preschool aged children make more thoughtful choices.

## Children's brain development and thinking skills

- ▶ Babies are born with millions of brain cells and the pathways between the cells that get them working are largely made over the first few years of life.
- ▶ The parts of the brain that are used most develop good links and become stronger.

This means that the early years are the best time to promote the skills for learning and thinking (but not the only time, as the brain can change throughout life).

As children's brains grow and develop, children become more able to hold things in their mind and remember what they have learned. These qualities are crucial for problem solving and decision making.

The ability to think, reason, manage feelings and the way we look at things are not separate, they are all dependent on each other. For example, a two-year-old who wanders away from a staff member may get very angry with the staff member for not finding him, because he does not yet understand that others cannot read his mind. He thinks the staff member knows where he is, so when he 'decides' to wander away he thinks people will find him. He gradually learns his mind is separate through maturation and through adults giving him opportunities to say 'No' and make decisions that are separate from theirs.

In order to make decisions and solve problems we need to be able to manage feelings and actions appropriately—to be the boss of ourselves, to understand what we need to do, and to make the best choices. This ability depends on:

- ▶ being able to manage feelings and impulses and actions (called self-regulation)
- ▶ being able to hold several things in mind in order to solve a problem (dependent on brain development)
- ▶ being able to think about a problem in different ways in order to get the best solution (dependent on brain development, learning and practice).

## Helping children manage feelings and actions

In the early years parents and carers can help children control their:

- ▶ **Negative feelings:** by helping children learn how to express their anger without hitting or yelling at someone
- ▶ **Positive feelings:** by helping children express enthusiasm, without for example rushing up and hugging strangers
- ▶ **Actions:** by helping children for example, stop themselves from snatching a toy from another child or running down the street if something frightens them
- ▶ **Impulses:** by helping children stop themselves and think before talking or acting
- ▶ **Attention:** by helping children focus on an activity without being quickly distracted.

Babies and toddlers are usually actively helped to develop these skills by their parents and carers. This control is then gradually handed over to children as they learn to manage their feelings and actions on their own.

These skills develop with practise and support from parents, carers and early childhood staff. For example, a one-year-old may stop themselves from touching an electric plug when a parent or carer is present. However, if the parent or carer is not present they may be unable to stop their desire to explore and touch the plug, even though they may be saying 'No! No!' to themselves at the same time. This example shows that the child knows what they are supposed to do, but have not yet mastered the control to do it. By the time children are three they can hold in mind two or three thoughts or tasks (e.g., 'Please get the newspaper from the hall and take it to Mummy').

When children learn to manage themselves in this way they can stop themselves from doing something that is not helpful and think about other ways to do things.

Young children benefit by practising decision making.

## Some choices not to offer young children

The following examples do not give children an opportunity to practise decision making and can make it difficult for children to develop the confidence and skills for good decision making.

- ▶ **Choices that are too hard for their reasoning abilities.** Two-year-olds don't yet have a good understanding of concepts like time and space or that when something disappears it may not come back. Sometimes a parent or carer may say to a two-year-old that they can choose to keep their dummy or have a special new toy. Two-year-olds need their comfort toys, such as dummies, at times of stress or separation from parents and carers, and they don't understand that if they give the dummy away, it won't come back when they need it. If a child gives away their dummy for a new toy, they may be distressed when it is not there at bedtime. This is a time when children don't yet have the ability to make the decision because they cannot predict what it will mean for them.
- ▶ **Choices between an activity and a consequence.** A statement such as 'Do you want to stop throwing that ball in here or do you want me to take away your ball?' is a warning of what the consequence will be if the child does not obey you, rather than an opportunity for the child to make a decision. This kind of choice just confuses children. It would be an actual choice if you said 'Your ball might break something in here. Do you want to play with it outside or would you like to have a story here with me?'
- ▶ **Statements that are not choices.** Don't offer a choice if there really is no decision to be made. For example, 'Do you want to come to school in the car to pick up your big brother?' is not a choice if the child has to come because there is no-one to care for them at home.

When two-year-old Lennie's mother asked him 'Do you want to come and have your bath now?' Lennie said 'No, thank you'. But Lennie did not really have a choice. His mother had decided it was bath time, so asking if he wanted a bath was not a time to practise making his own choices. His mother might have said 'Lennie it is bath time now, would you like to bring your duck or your cow to have a bath with you?' Lennie sometimes says 'Two minutes more'. He does not yet understand what two minutes means but he has heard his mother say it and he knows it means a bit more time. If his mother gives him a little more time he will be learning the beginning of negotiation skills.

Offer children choices to develop their reasoning abilities.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au). The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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