

## Supporting children's decision-making skills: Suggestions for families and staff

Provide a loving and  
 safe environment

Provide opportunities  
 for symbolic play

Encourage problem  
 solving

Learn about and model  
 planning

Games and stories

Practice learning

Mistakes and  
 challenges are part  
 of learning.



In an early childhood service it may seem simpler and quicker for staff, rather than children, to make many of the day-to-day decisions. However, allowing children's decision making provides many opportunities for children to practise their skills in the day-to-day activities of a service. One way of including children in decision making, is for staff to make a list of daily events they make decisions about and discuss which ones children might be able to contribute to, depending on their age and ability. These could include, within a list of possibilities, what and when they eat, when they rest, which room they play in, whether they want to be in a group activity, when they have their comfort toy or dummy, or how long their parent or carer stays. If this is a new idea for your service you could start on a small scale, for example, children could be involved in decision making for only one part of the day. The *Early Years Learning Framework* encourages parents and carers and staff to view children as capable contributors to their world, which supports their sense of agency—initiating choices and decisions to influence events and impact their world.

- ▶ Make sure there is a space and props such as dress-ups for symbolic and group play.
- ▶ Involve children in planning and following through so they can experience successful outcomes.
- ▶ Take some time afterwards to reflect with children on how their plan worked, what went well or what they might do differently next time.
- ▶ Ask children's opinions where possible and follow through with what they suggest.
- ▶ Use stories to talk about wise and unwise choices (e.g., *The Three Little Pigs*, *Goldilocks*, *Little Red Riding Hood*).
- ▶ Encourage children to understand that mistakes and challenges are part of learning.

The way adults interact with young children is very important to their developing thinking, decision-making and problem-solving skills. These skills will be needed in all areas of the child's life including for: health-based decisions, social relationship decisions and for solving educational problems. From birth onwards, children gain confidence if parents and carers gently guide them, from providing help to encouraging them to gradually take responsibility for themselves as they are able. The following are things parents and carers can do to help children learn decision-making and problem-solving skills:

## Provide a loving and safe environment

By providing loving caregiving and responding to children's needs and signals, parents and carers are providing an environment for children to explore and practise making decisions. It is helpful for parents and carers to provide a predictable environment in which children can feel safe and see patterns in what happens from day to day.

## Provide opportunities for symbolic play

Symbolic play is important for the development of thinking and problem-solving skills. This is when children play using objects to represent something else. For example, using a hairbrush to represent a microphone. In this kind of play children take on different roles, such as being a mother or father, train driver or superhero and use playthings in different ways, for example, a cardboard box may be an imaginary train, or a rug over a chair a rocket ship. In this kind of play children think creatively. As children work out roles and rules for the game they learn about negotiating with each other. Children have to hold several things in mind at once, such as their own role, other children's roles, the rules of the game and what they want to do next. Toddlers may play simple symbolic games on their own or occasionally for short times with another child, but it is not until the preschool years that children are able to manage more complex symbolic games; this continues and develops into middle childhood. Symbolic play uses skills that provide the basis for the ability to organise play, think things through, and cope with feelings.

## Encourage problem solving

Problem-solving skills help children make good decisions. Parents and carers can help children develop these skills by encouraging them to manage their feelings, look for different ways to solve the problem, plan the best way to solve the problem, and take action. For younger children, it is helpful to give some suggestions, and consider their suggestions even if they seem impossible.

The following are examples of how parents and carers can encourage children to problem solve:

'It is too wet to play outside, what could we do inside?'

'You can't find your teddy? Let's think about some places to look. Where were you playing with it?'

'We haven't got any icing for our cake. What other things would be good on a cake?'



## Learn about and model planning

The ability to think ahead and plan is important for solving problems and making decisions. This ability develops over the first few years but begins in infancy. Parents and carers can help children by modelling planning in their own behaviour, talking aloud as they plan, and by giving children practice in planning in ways they can manage.

### Modelling planning by showing how you do it

Show children how to think ahead and plan.

'We will go to the park soon. Now what do I need to put in the bag? Bottles of water, hats and sunscreen. I will put them in a bag ready to go.'

'It will soon be time to go to preschool. We will need your lunch box and drink and your hat. And you will need to have your shoes and socks on.'

### Practising planning.

Involve children in thinking about planning in day-to-day situations.

- ▶ 'Would you like to do some painting? What do you need to do to get started?'
- ▶ 'Here are some cakes for your birthday. We need to put them somewhere that they won't be eaten. Where could we put them?'
- ▶ 'It is going to be cold today. What do we need to walk to the shops?'
- ▶ 'We have some new seeds to plant. Where should we put them? They will need to be in the sun. What else do we need to plant them?'



## Games and stories

- ▶ Toddlers (around 18 months to 3 years) love games such as peek-a-boo, hide and seek and games where you copy each other's actions. This helps children develop thinking and planning skills.
- ▶ Preschool children (around 3 to 5 years) like to play games like 'Simon says' and 'Statues' which require children to have self-control and to think before they act.
- ▶ While telling and reading stories, children can learn to think ahead when adults stop and ask what might happen next or what would be a different ending.

## Practice learning

Children benefit from:

- ▶ Practice in decision making from birth on—for example, 'Which toy/food/book/game do you want?' Remember to give very young children limited choices, for example, between two things at first. You can do this with a baby by showing them two things and letting them choose without words.
- ▶ Opportunities to try things and succeed—this builds self-esteem.
- ▶ Encouragement to learn from mistakes—for example, 'Now we know something that doesn't work, let's think about something else we could do'
- ▶ Practice in attending to a task by breaking it down into small sections that children can complete and achieve.



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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