



Decision-making: schools

Children and young people's decision-making abilities develop with experience and maturity. The way adults interact with them is very important for these emerging skills, which will be needed in all areas of life.

How do decision-making skills develop?

Learning the skills for making good decisions takes time.

It's strongly influenced by the expectations and values that children learn from those around them. This occurs when they observe others, hear about and discuss values, and have opportunities to make choices and experience their consequences.

Younger children are more likely to:

- focus on one aspect of a situation
- focus on their own position
- look for immediate benefits
- want things now
- act without thinking first
- make simple distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong
- make decisions based on a whim.

Because of this, they need a lot of adult guidance to learn to choose wisely.

A good decision is one that's most likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone concerned.

By talking through the steps of decision-making, you can motivate children to think through their choices and understand the important things to consider when making decisions. Start with simple choices and gradually build up to bigger, more complex problem-solving as children's capabilities and skills improve.

Key steps in the decision-making process

- 1. Work out the problem:** Help the child identify and label their feelings so that they can understand the problem.
- 2. Plan to solve the problem:** Depending on their age and abilities, prompt or help them to brainstorm solutions. Talk about what might happen with each possible solution. This encourages children to consider different solutions before choosing what to do next.
- 3. Do something about it:** Sometimes the child will need your support to take action, or the reassurance that you're nearby. As they get older, children will be

able to do more problem-solving themselves and let you know how they go later.

Check back

Ask the child about the choice they made – did it help or not? This is important – if you don't check back and show the child how to try again, they may lose an opportunity to learn, or lose confidence in your capacity to help them.

Strategies for school educators

When children and young people are supported to make responsible choices at school, it enables them to manage their own behaviour and relate more effectively to others.

Opportunities to teach and reinforce decision-making skills can arise in the classroom, during social activities, at playtime, and in choosing how to behave on the school grounds. You can:

Teach skills for decision-making and goal-setting

For younger students:

- Give them opportunities to make simple choices. Ask students to explain the reasons for their choices so they develop evaluation skills.
- Comment on the actions of characters in stories (for example, "Do you think Charlie made a good decision? Do you think he should have done something different?").
- Model the steps for decision-making by talking through the issue to be solved.

For older students:

- Explicitly teach the steps of decision-making and provide opportunities for practising them.
- Build goal-setting and decision-making steps into assigned learning tasks by making them an explicit component of task instructions.

Involve students in decision-making

With guidance, even younger students can be involved in deciding on classroom and school rules. Children and young people accept that adults will cast the final vote but appreciate being consulted and having the opportunity to contribute to the rules. In addition to building children and young people's decision-making skills, this allows them to own and accept rules as necessary and fair. Giving students

some choice over what and how they learn can enhance motivation and responsibility.

Ask constructive questions

"Was that a good choice?" makes children and young people reflect on their choices and evaluate their actions. "What's a better way to handle it?" prompts them to choose a better option. "What can we do about this?" encourages them to discuss the problem and, with your help, think up strategies for managing it.

Support growing independence

Encourage children and young people to resolve problems for themselves. For example, in response to the question: "What should we play?", you could say, "Let's see, what ideas do you have?" They're encouraged to take responsibility for generating options. Further scaffolding can help them to evaluate the options and make a choice, while increasing confidence for future independent decision-making.

Learn about decision-making skills strategies for early childhood educators [here](#).

References

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2018). Core SEL competencies. Chicago: CASEL. Retrieved from <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>

External links

Raising Children Network – [Problem-solving with teenagers: steps and tips](#) / [Shifting responsibility to your child: teenage years](#) / [Independence in teenagers: how to support it](#)

ReachOut – [A step-by-step guide to problem solving](#) / [Decision making 101](#)