

How to Help Your Child Make Good Choices

Students making choices is always difficult, not only for the students but also for the adults in their lives who want what is best for them. It is especially hard when students don't want to talk about those choices with adults, or they think they "know best". It is hard for adults to sit by and let students make mistakes that they will learn from, even though the adult knows or can accurately predict how their choice will play out. Students do not always value the life experiences an adult has had because they think "it's different now than it was when you were a kid". So, what can you, as the caring adult, do to not only open that communication with your student, but also have your input heard and valued and hopefully influence them for the better?

One big barrier youth face when it comes to making decisions is their impulsivity. They may feel excited, anxious, upset, etc. when they think about a choice and its outcomes which can cause them to make rash decisions. The part of the brain that controls decision making skills is still developing in your student. Encouraging your student to stop and take some time to think about everything before making a decision will help them make more appropriate decisions. Help them see that they are making an impulsive decision when they make decisions too quickly and that they are making decisions based on emotions rather than rational thoughts.

There are five steps your student should go through when making a decision. The first step is to identify the decision. This is looking at how the student feels in the moment. Are they making an impulsive decision or do they need to take some time to think about their decision? You can do this by asking three questions: What feelings are you having right now?; What is the strongest emotion you are feeling? and When did you notice you were feeling this way? Taking a step back and taking some time will help them gain a better understanding of the problem they are trying to solve, what they want to accomplish and what the best possible outcome would be.

Step Two is helping the student understand their options. This can be done in many ways, like simply talking through the decision and the options that the student faces. The best way to encourage a student to come to you when they have a hard decision is to make sure there is open communication. Create a no judgment zone so that the student feels like their opinions and wants/needs are valued. Do not lecture them or come into the conversation with a "know it all" attitude. Guide the decision but do not make the decision for your student.

The Third Step is to make the decision. Some questions you could ask to help your student make a decision are: Will it help you achieve your goal? Is it honest? Will it create a

problem for someone else? and Is it safe? It is very important to help your student understand that with every decision comes a responsibility they will have as a result of that decision. Help guide the student to see if they are ready for that responsibility and help them decide for themselves if they think they can handle the outcome. Then if your student handles the responsibility in a good way, praise them. Help them see what they did well and it will encourage them to continue making good choices. Try not to intervene unless they or someone else is in danger. Let your student make little mistakes that they can learn from.

The next step is acting on the decision. This includes following through on the decision that the student has decided to make. Make sure that your student knows that no matter what the outcome is, you will be there to support and help them. Cultivate your relationship by talking with them and checking that they are ok after the fact. This will help the student feel like if something goes wrong, they can come to you for help. Or maybe they will be excited with how well the decision is going and want to share their experience with you. If that is the case, praise them for making good decisions to reinforce that behavior.

The last step is to reflect on the decision with the student. Help the student think through their decision-making process in order to see if there was anything they could do better in the future. Some questions to ask are: What did I learn about myself? What's important to me? What was hard about what I did? What was easy about what I did? The next time I have to make a decision, what would I do the same? and What might I do differently next time?

Decision-making skills are hard for youth to learn on their own because they may not make decisions by actually thinking about them but rather make decisions based on emotions. Taking these steps and helping students develop their skills while they are young will help them be able to make good decisions as adults. Their brains are still forming and they are learning these skills either on their own or with the guidance of caring adults. This is one skill that they will need to become a self-functioning adult who makes good decisions for the long-term.

References:

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Why teens make bad choices and how you can help them

School Community Intervention and Prevention

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