

# HELPING CHILDREN LEARN DECISION-MAKING SKILLS\*



Adapted primarily from [Ages & Stages: Making Choices](#) , a publication in *Scholastic's Early Childhood Today*

\* While this guide presents specific stages of development, some children may benefit from the supports described under a different stage of development than their chronological age.



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 "Ceding decision making to your children is an incremental process based on their age and maturity."  
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- Taylor, J., 2009



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 "Praise children when they try decisions and help support them if they have to try again."  
 .....

- Anne Mikan



# 0 - 2

# 3 - 4

# 5 - 6

## TINY CHOICE MAKERS

Infants indicate choices through body movements and eye contact. At about one year, an infant's choices are more deliberate and less-instinctual.

Toddlers are famous for their "want it all, do it all" approach to life. It takes considerable self-control for a child to choose one toy from a variety of toys. Predictable routines and limited choices help him/her begin to make thoughtful choices.

### What you can do:

- Offer toddlers a small selection of toys to choose from.
- Rotate toys so the selection remains interesting.
- Make sure each toy has a place. An orderly environment helps toddlers focus and choose one toy at a time. It takes time for toddlers to use language to talk about choices. Remember to give them the time they need.

(Church et al., 2020)

## CHOICES FOR PLEASURE & FRIENDSHIP

Three-year-olds are still very "me-centered" and make choices based on their own, limited points of view. Four-year-olds often make choices for social reasons as well as personal preferences.

### What you can do:

Give children opportunities to explain their reasons for choices:

- At snack, offer a variety of fruit. Discuss choices.
- Think out loud as you explain why you are making daily choices.
- Don't offer choices if it's an expectation.
- Let children know they can verbally give their reasons without someone making fun of them.
- Set up tasks where children can accomplish the tasks alone, or let them determine that it's easier to get it done by cooperating with others.
- Read books in which characters make choices. (Church et al., 2020)

## MINOR CHOICES, MAJOR DECISIONS

Five- and six-year-old children are becoming more conscious of decision making and how choices affect others. Children feel a certain luxury in this new responsibility and take it very seriously. Choosing what to wear, what activity to do, and whom to set up a play date with can be monumental decisions for a five- and -six-year-old. In the process, children are defining their personality and creating an individuated self.

### What you can do:

- Give children some choices about how to spend their time.
- Include children in the process of choosing for the larger group.
- Discuss the choices children are not ready to make on their own yet. Help them to think about why they are not old enough to make some choices and decisions on their own.

(Church et al., 2020)



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 "Regardless of physical or cognitive ability your youth can play an active role in the transition journey, and in determining his or her own life, if you provide encouragement and guidance along the way."  
 .....

- Pacer Center, Inc. 2016



# Middle Childhood

# Adolescence

## SELF-REGULATION & RISK-TAKING

The ability to make good decisions improves with maturity. Impulse control, strategic planning, anticipating future consequences, and resisting peer influences all increase with age. Later in the middle years, children learn how to assess risk, respond to threatening situations, and protect themselves from a variety of social issues like bullying, violence, substance abuse, and technology-related threats. In this period children may take risks due to a desire for immediate reward and a need to seek out thrills.

### What you can do:

- Begin discussing ways that children can protect themselves from potential threats (bullying, violence, substance abuse, and technology-related threats).
- Create opportunities for children to participate in positive social activities (e.g., volunteering) as it may reduce the thrill or reward they experience from potentially dangerous ones.
- Not all risk-taking is a problem. It can help children engage in new behaviors and learn new skills. Look for opportunities for children to practice healthy risk-taking.
- Unsupervised travel and outdoor play benefit children through physical activity, and can help them acquire confidence and independence.
- Support children to set priorities and organize their time, like doing homework before spending time online. (Church et al., 2020)

## BUILDING INDEPENDENCE & TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD

This is a time to involve children more in education, medical, and family decisions. Help them set goals and make plans to reach them. Each time they practice, your child gets closer and closer to enjoying a life that they have chosen for themselves.

### What you can do:

- Help them practice asking for help from safe people (siblings, friends) and in low-risk situations (asking for help to find an item at the grocery store).
- Talk about work/career and post-secondary education opportunities based on their interests and abilities
- Help them identify additional responsibilities they can choose to take on (chores, managing their own money, etc.)
- Talk about housing and living arrangements as an adult:
  - Do they want to live entirely alone, or with other people?
  - What kinds of support will they need to live on their own?
  - Where would they like to live? (Look for housing *with* your child.)
- Teach children to take responsibility for their medical care:
  - Have them greet, talk to, and ask questions of their doctor
  - Have children start help filling out their medical forms and scheduling appointments (or listening to you schedule them). (Church et al., 2020)

# REFERENCES & RESOURCES

The information in this guide originated primarily from and is copyrighted by Scholastic, Inc.:

Pool, Miller, & Church. "Ages & Stages: Making Choices." Scholastic, Inc.,  
<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/ages-stages-making-choices/>

## Additional sources include:

Taylor, J.. "Parenting: Decision Making—Help Your Children Become Good Decision Makers." *Psychology Today*,  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-prime/200910/parenting-decision-making>

"Ten Tips That May Help Your Child's Transition to Adulthood." Pacer Center, Inc.  
<https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c107.pdf>

## Related Resources and Further Reading:

*How to Teach Decision-Making Skills to Adolescents:*  
<http://www.bluestemcenter.com/articles/How%20to%20Teach%20Decision%20Making%20Skills%20to%20Adolescents.pdf>

*Fostering Self-Determination Among Children and Youth with Disabilities—Ideas from Parents for Parents:*  
<http://www2.waisman.wisc.edu/cedd/naturalsupports//pdfs/FosteringSelfDetermination.pdf>

*Self-Determination: Supporting Successful Transition:*  
[http://www.ncset.org/publications/researchtopractice/NCSETResearchBrief\\_2.1.pdf](http://www.ncset.org/publications/researchtopractice/NCSETResearchBrief_2.1.pdf)

*Teaching Decision-Making to Students with Learning Disabilities by Promoting Self-Determination:*  
<http://www.ldonline.org/article/5634/>

*Transition Skills Tips & Tools: Decision Making and Problem Solving for Teens:*  
<http://dsc.uic.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/0515GG.pdf>

