



## Responsible Decision Making

In a perfect world, every decision that a student makes would have a favorable outcome, no negative consequences, and make sense. That rarely happens. Making decisions is complex, often emotionally charged, and frequently involves tough and ethical choices. If decision making is difficult for adults, think for a moment just how challenging it is for students to navigate in today's world.

When it comes to making decisions, students need to be able to identify the problem, manage their emotions so they can handle their situation effectively, look at possible options and alternatives, analyze available resources, consider the consequences of their decision, and reflect on the outcome.

Good decision making is an important and learnable life skill that can be taught and reinforced both at home and at school. To make sound decisions, children, like adults, need good information. Sometimes, making poor decisions and experiencing the consequences help shape better decisions in the future. Consider this: since decision making is a skill, students can become very good at making *poor* decisions. Therefore, they should be encouraged to understand the importance of making ethical decisions, know available options, and consider the consequences of their actions and decisions.

If a student makes a questionable or bad choice, adults will often ask, "Why did you do that?" The typical response is "I don't know,"

or "Because," or "It's no big deal." Perhaps the question is met with silence. Little is accomplished and even less is learned. In his book *Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers* (Three Rivers Press), Maurice Elias advises parents and adults to avoid "Why" questions because they are often perceived as accusatory which sets the stage for a defensive response. Keeping the door open for communication is essential in the process of learning about and making good decisions.

Instead of "why" questions, ask "what" questions. What are you feeling? What would you say the problem is? What did you want to accomplish in this situation? What have you tried in similar situations? Also, asking open ended questions works better than closed questions. "Please tell me what happened" is a better approach than "Why did you do that?"

Social emotional learning (SEL) is sometimes called "the missing piece," because it represents a part of education that links academic knowledge to a specific set of skills important to success in schools, families, communities, workplaces, and life in general. It is essential that parents and schools work together in sending strong and coordinated messages that reinforce good decision making skills. Students can learn to successfully solve complex problems in the classroom and in real-life situations with practice, guidance, and positive modeling by adults.

### WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Start youth off with select options so they are not overwhelmed. Expand choices as they grow and mature.
- Teach children a decision-making formula similar to this example (although there are many from which to choose):
  - ⇒ Define the problem
  - ⇒ Manage emotions; remain calm
  - ⇒ Explore the options
  - ⇒ Consider the consequences
  - ⇒ Reflect/learn from decisions made.
- Teach by example. Students of every age watch and learn from the adults around them. A thoughtful, analytical, and positive role model serves as the best teacher.
- Help youth solve their own problems. Be there to guide and assist but they need to know how to solve problems and learn from the decisions they make.

### SEL RESOURCES

#### Books:

*Decision Making Is A Life Science* (2009). Finkel, E.

[www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org)

*The Connection Between Academic and Social-Emotional Learning*. (2006) Elias, M.

[www.casel.org/downloads](http://www.casel.org/downloads)

*Improving Students' Decision Making Skills*. Gregory, Robin S. and Clemen, Robert T. Decision Research, Eugene, Oregon

*Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers* (2000). Elias, Tobias, and Friedlander. Three Rivers Press.

#### Websites:

Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning.

[www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)



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