



## Child Development: Teaching Decision Making Skills

**Making decisions is a part of life.** The ability to make wise decisions is a combination of:

- Age/developmental stage
- A sense of right and wrong
- Accurate information
- Knowledge of a decision making process
- Practice, practice, practice!

**Start with simple choices:** For very young children, decision-making may simply be you saying something like: “*Would you like juice or water?*” That decision is very straightforward, and mostly based on your child’s preference.

You can provide simple choice-making opportunities like this to your children. Give two choices—both of which are acceptable to you. Your child then gets to exert control over the decision, but doesn’t risk getting a “No” for an answer. Making simple choices is the first step in teaching/learning decision-making.

**Teaching wise decision-making:** As a child gets older, decision-making becomes more complex than simply choosing between two clear options. As your child ages, their ability to understand consequences, reason critically, think hypothetically, and apply other’s experiences to their own life increases. Coach your child by asking them questions. For example: “And if you did it this way, how would your friend feel? If you did it this other way, how might your teacher respond? How do you think your [trusted friend/babysitter] might handle it?”

**Decision-making process vs. decision maker:** It is very important to distinguish between the decision making process and the decision maker. Including your children in the process means that everyone’s voice will be heard. Everyone gets equal time to state opinions and preferences. But there are certain decisions that adults are responsible for.

- **Safety and Finances:** As the parent, you are responsible for making all decisions that involve safety. You can solicit your child’s input, but the final decision is yours. One way to phrase this is, “It is my job to make sure you stay as safe as possible, and that is not safe.”
- **Ethics and Values:** You also have the final say about decisions that have to do with ethics/values. Here’s a simple example: stealing doesn’t physically hurt someone (so it’s not really a safety issue), but it’s illegal and wrong. So of course stealing wouldn’t be a decision you’d allow, even though your child can certainly express an opinion.





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**Too much parental control over decision-making = rebellion:** There are many opportunities in which children can actually be the decision makers. And it can be hard for you, as a parent, to step out of the decision maker shoes and into more of a coaching role. Just remember that the more you exert unnecessary control, the more your children will rebel. And the more you open the process, the more ownership your children will have over the consequences of the decisions. But don't expect them to make wise choices until you teach a decision-making process.

**Most decision-making processes involve the following steps:**

1. Identify clearly the need to make a decision
2. Define the issue in simple terms
3. Brainstorm possible solutions
4. Narrow down solutions based on pre-determined criteria (safety, money, values are three great criteria).
5. Try 1—3 of the narrowed down solutions.
6. Evaluate the solution(s).
7. Vote on a decision.
8. Re-evaluate as needed.

**Try to keep it as simple as possible. Some guidelines are:**

- Be specific about the issue to be decided
- Be clear about the parameters (cost, time, energy involved)
- Be clear about who is the final decision maker
- Give all the children in your family the opportunity to offer suggestions
- Remember that until you try something at least a few times you can't really know how well it works. You might say—"Well, this seems like the choice you want to make. Let's try it for a few weeks and then discuss how it's going. If we like it, we'll keep doing it. If not, we'll try something else!" This way you keep the door open for continual re-evaluation. As this happens in life all the time, building flexibility into the process is very important.

For more tips, or if you need more information or would like to talk to someone:

**In Washington State:** Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE

**Outside of Washington State:** contact your local Circle of Parents agency at

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