

Teaching Children to Make Good Choices

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For teachers and parents, it is easier to tell children what to do than to guide them in making a choice. However, this creates teens and young adults who fail to make good choices, because they have always depended on others to make decisions for them.

There are so many things children cannot control in life, such as where they attend school, the people in their families, and the financial circumstances of their homes. However, there are many choices they can make if adults allow them to do so. If you instruct a child in the early years of life to make simple choices, it will be easier to make good choices as a teen or an adult. Children need to practice making choices throughout childhood, experiencing both the consequences of wrong choices and enjoying the self-esteem that results from making good choices.

Why should we teach children to make good decisions?

Decision-making creates a sense of responsibility. The choice of cereal, the shirt or blouse to wear, the socks, the shoes, the flavor of toothpaste, the book or puzzle to use, the colors to use—these seem like simple choices. However, some children never get to make them. When you give a child the opportunity to make choices, it creates a sense of self-worth and responsibility in the child.

Decision-making creates a sense of independence. As children develop, they quickly reach the “Me do it” stage. I can use that glue bottle. I can use that paint. I want to tape the picture in place. I want to pour the milk. I want to pass the cookies. I want to choose my clothes. I want to choose my music or TV program. This is healthy and leads to an independent spirit. Sometimes, you may need to curtail this independent spirit if children want to do something that would harm or injure them. In most cases, children need to have the opportunity to try new things and use their emerging skills. Make a game out of duties you want the child to do, such as putting away supplies or toys. Children are more likely to choose an option that is fun.

Decision-making creates a sense of confidence. Children who have always depended on others to make decisions will find it difficult to make decisions when away from home or school. Other people may sway these children to make the wrong decision. Affirm children who make right choices and build their confidence for making future decisions.

How do you teach children to make good decisions?

Start when children are young and let them make age-appropriate decisions from several options. “Which of these two healthy snacks would you like?” “Which of these puzzles would you like to use?”

Support the child’s decision even if it is not what you would do. If a child wants to color the bananas with a purple crayon, that is fine. If a child wants to pair stripes and plaids for everyday clothes, that is fine. Affirm the child’s decision if it is appropriate.

As children mature, give them more opportunities to make choices from options. Let them choose the object to take for "Show and Tell." Give them options for an activity for outdoor time. Let the children decide whether to do a project in pairs or small groups. Let the children decide whether to draw or write a response to a story response. Let them decide whether they will have 3, 4, or 5 play practices. (Guess what they will choose!) Let children choose which of two Bible verses or poems to memorize or rows of math problems to practice. Let the class vote on a service project for the class. Decide from options how to review a story or book.

Give children an opportunity to discuss various options and consequences of a decision before making the decision. If a child observes another child doing something wrong, use this to help the child think about the options the other child had in making the choice and the possible consequences of that choice. Help a child to realize there are options to almost any choice and there are always consequences for a choice.

Let the children experience the consequences of their choices. When the results are good, affirm the children and let them know the choice was a good one. When the results are not good, make it a teachable moment. Help the children realize what the other options were and the possible results of those options. Protecting children from consequences is detrimental to their social and psychological growth. Help children experience consequences, but let the children know you love and support them.

Provide moral standards for the children. Help them know what is right and what is wrong. Let children know what you expect from them. Keep in mind the child's stage of development and ability to reason. Bible stories can show that wonderful things can happen in a person's life if he or she makes decisions that honor God.

Every adult who works with children wants them to grow to be responsible adults who do what is right. Allowing children to make decisions in their early years and experience the results will guide them toward being confident and responsible adults.

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