

# Good Judgement Takes Practice

In a world where teens and young adults face many choices, parents want children to develop their thinking skills so that they learn to make good decisions. You can use everyday opportunities to teach decision making and, most important, to give children chances to practise.

## Child-led play

Play time is perfect for letting children practise decision making in areas where the choices matter little to adults. Children can choose for themselves which colour of block goes on the top of the tower, what gets served at the dolls' tea party or whether they play on the swings or the slide at the park.

## Offer choices

Even very young children can start making simple choices: which glass they will drink their juice from, which shoe to put on first. Choices get more elaborate as the child gets older: what clothes to wear to school, at what time to do homework.

## Set limits

Parents need to determine the limits within which choices get made. For instance, your child can choose to go to bed in red pyjamas or blue pyjamas, but you set the bedtime. Your child may choose what gift to buy for a friend's birthday, but you decide on the price range. Your children's age and their individual abilities will influence which decisions you allow them to make.

## Ask questions

Parents can ask questions to stimulate children to think about the factors that go into making a choice. For example, if your child is deciding what to wear today, you could ask questions about the weather and the planned activities: Is it raining? What is the temperature? Do you think it will be warmer later in the day? Will you be playing outside? Your own experience will tell you what things you need to ask questions about. If you dictate the choices, the child won't learn or practise the steps in the process.

## Teach information gathering

Sometimes a child doesn't yet know how to get the information that is required. In the above example of dressing for the weather, you could show your child how to read the thermometer or find the weather forecast on TV or radio or in the newspaper. There will also be times when you will be the one to supply the information; they then can decide how to use it.

## Practise with stories

You can encourage thinking about the consequences of choices when you read books or tell stories to your children. Ask them what they think will happen next, what would have happened if the character had done something different, what they would do in that situation.

## Give responsibility

When you let children decide for themselves, they may make choices different from yours. This is why it is important to set limits and give them responsibility for decisions in cases where you can live with their choices, even if you don't agree. If you can't stand the thought that they might eat dessert without finishing their main course, make everything in their lunch box equally nutritious.

## Allow consequences

Giving responsibility also means allowing children to experience the consequences of their actions. Sometimes these consequences will be uncomfortable for children, and it may be hard as a parent to see your children unhappy. However, if you rescue them, you send them the message that it doesn't matter what decision they make, their parents will fix anything that goes wrong.

## Resist feeling incompetent

Sometimes, when you let your children make their own choices, other people will blame *you* for what goes wrong. You will be held responsible for decisions that your children make, whether you agree with their choices or not. That's why parents whose preschoolers choose to match a striped shirt with polka dot pants wear a button that says, "My child dressed himself today!"

It takes strength and conviction to stand up to this attitude from others. A sense of humour helps too. Perhaps there should be a button for parents of teens: "My child paid for getting her hair dyed purple with her own money."

## Be patient

Learning to make good decisions takes time, and mistakes along the way are part of the learning process. As Mark Twain observed: "Good judgement comes from experience. And where does experience come from? Experience comes from bad judgement." It takes patience to raise a thinking child.

*by Betsy Mann*