

Helping children to choose wisely

Nine year-old Zak was in a bit of a panic. "Grandma, Grandma, you have to write a note!" "Why, Zak?" his Grandma wanted to know. "Because I didn't do my homework and I don't want my teacher to get mad at me."

Zak's Grandma remembered asking him that afternoon if he had any homework. At the time he was watching his favourite TV show. He told her, "Not much. I'll do it in a minute."

After that Amos had called and invited Zak over. Amos had a new video game and Zak couldn't wait to play it. He had forgotten all about his homework.

Now it was bedtime and Zak suddenly remembered that his homework wasn't done. If only Zak would learn to think through his decisions more carefully!

It's frustrating for parents and carers when children don't think ahead and they are left to sort out problems at the last minute. Adults might be able to come up with a solution for the immediate crisis, but what about getting children to think things through in the first place?

Effective decision-making is a skill that children can learn

To be able to make good decisions children must learn to:

- recognise when there is a choice for them to make
- understand that they are responsible for making the decision
- take others' needs into account
- think of different possible choices or solutions and decide which is best.

Children learn skills for effective decision-making when they are taught the steps and given opportunities to practise using them to solve problems. Teaching Zak these steps and reminding him to use them could have helped him make a better decision.

Being able to plan ahead and choose wisely are very important skills that help children succeed at home, at school and in life. Parents and carers can help by teaching children how to think through decisions and giving them opportunities to practise their skills.



Learning the steps

Steps for decision-making

- 1 What do you have to decide about?
- 2 What choices do you have?
- 3 Weigh up the pros and cons of each option and choose the best one
- 4 Put your choice into action and then check how it works out

Example

- Deciding what to do after school
- Go and play with friends
- Stay and do homework
- Watch my favourite TV show
- Going to friend's house is more fun than homework
- Watching TV is fun and relaxing
- I'll get into trouble if homework doesn't get done
- Do homework as soon as I get home from school so that I can watch TV, or if a friend calls, I am free to go and play

Helping children take responsibility

Children often focus on immediate wants and don't consider long-term consequences. They need adult guidance to develop their decision-making skills. Parents and carers can prompt good decision-making by identifying appropriate choices for children to make and using questions to help them think through the steps.

To learn to use decision-making skills children need to be shown how to use the steps and be given opportunities to practise them. Practice and experience are necessary for building skills.

It is important to remember that children's thinking skills develop gradually and so does their capacity for planning ahead and weighing up options in order to make decisions. Children do not learn to make good decisions overnight. They need to start with simple things.

How parents and carers can help

- Give children a choice between two options. This helps to make decisions manageable.
- Limit the number of choices to ones that are realistic for children to make (depending on their age and ability).
- Encourage children to give reasons for their choices. This teaches them to think through their decisions.
- Ask, "Is that a good idea?" or "Do you think that will work?" Instead of saying, "This is what you should do," ask "What about this?" Asking encourages children to develop their own judgment.
- Listen with interest to children's explanations. Learning to explain their thinking helps children think better.
- Give children a role in family decisions, for example, when planning activities or deciding on household jobs. This helps children learn how to make decisions that take others into account.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing



Principals
Australia
Institute
Learning. Leading.