



# Preparing Children to Make Good Decisions

by Lucy Rimalower, M.A.

From that first “No!” asserted by your 18-month-old child, you realize that she has her own mind and is going to make her own decisions. Of course, when you’re raising a toddler, those decisions are often controlled or presented by you. “Would you like to wear your blue pajamas or the red ones?” Or “would you like to have a cookie for dessert?”

But as your child gets older, his decisions become increasingly independent, both in terms of the context and his thinking. Cookies and pajamas become friends and activities. Your child has to make decisions that impact social relationships: whether or not to share, whether or not to cheat on a test, whether or not to be selfish or selfless. Decisions become harder. That’s the bad news. Peer pressure is generally associated with teenagers but exists for children from the time they have their first social experiences with other children, including siblings. The good news is your child’s cognitive development prepares him for decision-making and your guidance and values can help your child learn to choose wisely, long before he’s faced with the kinds of decisions that aren’t as obvious as cookies.

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development proposes that children learn to think abstractly and reason logically around the age of twelve (Piaget, 1950). Specifically, they are able to consider hypothetical situations, which gives them the ability to role-play, a great way to help your children prepare

for the tough decisions they face. But you don’t have to wait until your children are preteens in order to influence their decision-making. A recent study (Heilman et. al., 2009) found that children between the ages of three and four develop affective decision-making, using declarative knowledge, meaning that they use facts they know to inform their choices. You can provide them with those facts and, more importantly, you can provide them with your values. Let them know what your family believes about sharing, about respect for self and others, about kindness and safety.

While you can provide your children with clear information about your values, it’s difficult to help children understand the consequence of choosing, that they are then committed (sometimes) to one option or they have eliminated another option. There are some decisions presented to us on a daily basis that we have the opportunity to do over. Today your child chooses ice cream, tomorrow he chooses a cookie. Today your child chooses not to share his toy with a friend, tomorrow he chooses to share. Other decisions, however, require letting go of a desirable option. Help your children understand that choices sometimes mean either/or, but not both. For young children in particular, there may be low frustration tolerance around decision-making. Some children feel anxious about making the “right” decision. They may be concerned about disappointing

you or they may not trust their ability to know their own needs to make a decision. In those cases, your feedback may be helpful. “You know, sweetie, the last time you chose to have a playdate with Billy, you had a great time.” Acknowledging a child’s decision-making in this way may also build his confidence about making choices. Other children (and adults) struggle with decisions because of the disappointment they experience when they don’t get to have things both ways. Honor the loss of the road not taken and help them make meaning of their decisions. Decisions reflect our identity and our values. Although cookies might not seem that important, practicing choice prepares children for the vital life skill of decision-making.

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Practice, practice, practice!

Offer children choices early so that they can begin to understand the power and consequences of decisions.

Role-Play!

Help your children to feel ready for tough decisions by role-playing scenarios, either known or anticipated. This strategy can be useful for choices ranging from sharing to responding to drugs and alcohol.

Model!

Talk about decisions you’ve had to make and what has helped you to make those decisions.

Stop the Clock!

Teach your children that although some decisions have to be made in the moment, most important choices deserve time and consideration. It’s always ok to answer, “I have to think about that!”

## References

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