

Decision-making: schools

Children and young people's decision-making abilities develop with experience and growth.

How do decision-making skills develop?

Learning the skills for making good decisions takes time.

Decision-making skills are shaped by the expectations, values, and experiences children and young people encounter in their unique cultural, social, family and community context.

These skills are built at different rates, and children and young people's approach may be influenced by individual strengths, abilities and needs. Some people may require additional support or adapted strategies to engage in decision-making opportunities.

However, children and young people mostly build their skills by observing others, having opportunities to make choices and experience their consequences.

Younger children are more likely to:

- focus on one aspect of a situation
- focus primarily on their own position
- prioritise immediate benefits
- want things now
- take action before fully considering the consequences
- make simple distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong
- make decisions quickly.

Because of this, they benefit from adult guidance and opportunities to practise making thoughtful choices, while gradually learning how their decisions both impact themselves and others.

A good decision is one that's most likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone involved and considers how it affects others.

By talking through the steps of decision-making, you can help motivate children to think through their choices and understand the important things to consider when making decisions. Start with simple choices and gradually build up to bigger, more complex problem-solving as children's capabilities and skills improve.

Some children and young people may need additional support, such as visual prompts or a guided discussion, to explore their choices effectively.

Key steps in the decision-making process

Work out the challenge

Help the child/young person identify and label their feelings so that they can understand the problem. For some people this may involve alternative communication methods, such as visual aids or gestures, to help them express their understanding.

Plan to solve the challenge

Depending on their age and abilities, prompt or help them to brainstorm solutions. Talk about what might happen with each possible solution. This encourages children to consider different solutions before choosing what to do next. Where needed, provide scaffolding or alternative ways to explore options, such as role-playing or using social stories.

Offer support

Sometimes the child will need your support to take action, or the reassurance that you're

nearby. As they get older, children will be able to do more problem-solving themselves and let you know how they go later.

Check back/Reflect

Ask the child about the choice they made – did it help or not? This is important – if you don't check back and show the child how to try again, they may lose an opportunity to learn, or lose confidence in your capacity to help them. Encouraging children to reflect on their decisions in a way that suits their communication style helps build understanding and confidence.

Strategies for school educators

When children and young people are supported to make responsible choices at school, it enables them to manage their own behaviour and relate more effectively to others.

Opportunities to teach and reinforce decision-making skills can arise in the classroom, during social activities, at playtime, and in choosing how to behave on the school grounds. You can:

Teach skills for decision-making and goal-setting

For younger students

- Give them opportunities to make simple choices. Ask students to explain the reasons for their choices so they develop evaluation skills. Ensure these choices are accessible to all students, considering diverse abilities and backgrounds.
- Comment on the actions of characters in stories (for example, "Do you think Charlie made a good decision? Do you think he should have done something different?"). Select stories that reflect diverse cultures and experiences to promote inclusivity.
- Model the steps for decision-making by talking through the issue to be solved. Use clear and inclusive language and consider visual aids or gestures to support understanding for all students.

For older students

- Explicitly teach the steps of decision-making and provide opportunities for practising them. Incorporate scenarios that reflect a range of cultural and personal experiences to ensure relevance for all students.
- Build goal-setting and decision-making steps into assigned learning tasks by making them an explicit component of task instructions.
- Differentiate tasks to accommodate varying learning needs and provide multiple means of engagement.

Involve students in decision-making

With guidance, even younger students can be involved in deciding on classroom and school rules. Children and young people accept that adults will cast the final vote but appreciate being consulted and having the opportunity to contribute to the rules.

In addition to strengthening children and young people's decision-making skills, this fosters ownership and a sense of fairness about rules.

Providing opportunities for collaborative decision-making, such as group projects or class discussions, can enhance motivation, responsibility and teamwork skills. Ensure that all students, including those experiencing disability or from diverse cultural backgrounds, have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in these discussions.

Ask constructive questions

"How do you feel about that choice?" makes children and young people reflect on their choices and evaluate their actions.

"What are some other ways you could have handled it?" prompts them to choose a different option. "What can we do about this?" encourages them to discuss the problem and, with your help, think up strategies for managing it.

Be mindful to frame questions in a way that is understandable to all students, consider using

visual supports and be mindful to use plain language wherever you can.

Support growing independence

Encourage children and young people to resolve problems for themselves, while providing guidance as needed to help build confidence and critical thinking skills.

For example, in response to the question: "What should we play?", you could say, "Let's see, what ideas do you have?" They're encouraged to take responsibility for generating options.

Further scaffolding can help them to evaluate the options and make a choice, while increasing confidence for future independent decision-making.

Provide additional support or alternative communication methods for students who may need them to fully participate in problem-solving activities.

These opportunities to encourage thinking skills and having input into decisions helps foster children and young people's sense of agency - the feeling of being in control and having influence over the world around you - and this helps support their decision-making skills as well as their mental health and wellbeing.

Be You Resources

Learn about [decision-making skills](#) strategies for early childhood educators.

Learn more about [Disability and inclusion](#)

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about [building family partnerships](#) and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Bibliography

Visit [Decision-making: schools](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

External links

Raising Children Network –

[Problem-solving with teenagers: steps and tips](#)

[Shifting responsibility to your child: teenage years](#) [Independence in teenagers: how to support it](#)

ReachOut –

[A step-by-step guide to problem solving](#)

[Decision making 101](#)

