



HYG-5301-98-R10

Decision Making/Problem Solving With Teens

We make decisions every day, big and little. Decision making is an important skill to teach to children of all ages, because parents want children to grow up to be independent, responsible, happy adults. Some research has shown that those who are able to evaluate a situation and make a decision are often more successful in life. Decision making skills should start early with giving young children small choices between two options. However, as children turn into teens they will need to learn to make more decisions as they develop independence. Learning and using a decision making and problem solving process will help teens grow toward this goal.

Teens need to make more and more of the decisions affecting them. They will learn and grow from their successes and their mistakes. If parents make most of the decisions for them, they will not be ready to take on this task as they become adults.

How can you, as a parent, help them learn decision making skills? Teach them how to work through the steps in decision making and let them make decisions. Frequently you may be involved in the process, and you can model appropriate actions. This is also a great opportunity to open communication between you and your child.

Six Steps to Decision Making/Problem Solving

- 1. Identify and define the problem. Consider what an optimal outcome or goal might be.**
- 2. List possible options/alternatives.**

Use a brainstorming technique where you put a lot of ideas on paper. It is important to let the teen come up with the first idea and put it down even if it doesn't seem workable to you. If they can't seem to get started (give them time to think first), ask if you may make a suggestion. Making it silly or outlandish may encourage them to be free to say their ideas.

Keep going until you can't think of any more ideas/options. Remember not to be judgmental. This is just a gathering of ideas.

- 3. Evaluate the options.**

Let the teen evaluate the options, with you there for guidance, support, and encouragement. If you see a point they are not thinking of, ask them if you can bring up a point. By asking their permission to bring up a point, they are more likely to really listen to your point and not consider it a lecture or put down of their ideas and thought process.

Having the teen ask the following questions can help them evaluate their options: Is it unkind? Is

it hurtful? Is it unfair? Is it dishonest? Is it in line with the goal?

4. Choose one option.

It is important that the solution to the problem does not create a problem for someone else.

5. Make a plan and do it.

This is probably the most difficult step. If their choice is not acceptable to the other person, they may need to go back to the list of options.

6. Evaluate the problem and solution.

This is probably the most neglected step in decision making but it is critical to the learning process. Look at: What brought the problem about? Can a similar problem be prevented in the future? How was the present problem solved? They can feel good about their success—or learn and take ownership of looking for another solution. Avoid saying, “I told you so,” if their solution didn’t work.

Cooperative Problem Solving

Cooperative problem solving is a way to deal with disagreements between parent and teen. It builds on the six-step decision making model.

1. Present the problem.

2. Look for agreements that lead to solutions.

At every point, parents should look for agreement. Watch out for when it changes from “let’s work this out” to “let’s fight.”

3. Gather information on the perceptions of everyone concerned.

For example: A teen doesn’t do a chore when you ask him/her or gets very angry with you. It is often best to wait until a later time when you are both calm. Ask the teen how he/she feels about doing the chores. The teen may reply something like, “It wasn’t a good time for me.”

4. Stick to the issue and listen.

Instead of replying with a sarcastic comment like, “It never seems to be a good time,” try reflecting their feelings: “So you were busy at the time?” When kids start sharing their feelings, parents need

to listen carefully for the feelings underneath the words. They may not be used to sharing feelings and may be wary that a lecture is coming. He or she might reply, “Yes, I hate it when you say ‘Do it now.’” Parent: “Oh, I didn’t know you felt that way. Do you have any other feelings about it?”

5. Keep asking: “Is there anything else?”

It is important to keep asking this question until it all comes out. Otherwise you’ll probably be dealing with surface issues rather than deeper issues. Use responses that reflect what they have just said to see if you are understanding: “So that’s your least favorite chore?” Then ask: “Is there anything else?”

6. Reflect your understanding.

See if you can summarize and say back to your teen in a calm, neutral voice what he/she just said to you. If your teen says that isn’t what he/she meant, ask him/her to clarify. By this point the parent should be aware of how their teen is feeling about the issue and probably others.

7. Share your perceptions.

One way to guarantee a nonreceptive teen audience is to share your perceptions with your kids before asking if they are willing to listen. There is something magical about getting their permission first that invites listening and cooperation. After they have agreed to listen, share your perceptions of the problem. Remain calm and do not put them down. Just share your feelings.

8. Ask your teen to reflect their understanding.

Parent: “Can you tell me what you just heard me say?” Let them respond. It is helpful for a parent to respond that they weren’t criticizing them, but just sharing their feelings. Also state that you realize that it may be different for them and that’s okay.

9. Brainstorm for solutions.

Now you both have shared thoughts and feelings and had them respected by the other (validated). It’s time to ask the question, “Could we see if we can come up with some ideas we can both live with?” Then brainstorm ideas.

- Agree on a solution.
- Set a date for evaluation.
- Follow through.

A parent's role is to teach children. By being respectful they learn respect. By following through on our commitments and being responsible, they learn responsibility. We teach through example. The old saying, "Do as I say, not as I do," doesn't cut it nor does it bring the desired outcome.

Teen brains are still in construction. Parents also must realize that though this decision making is an important skill to teach and to learn, teens are still more likely to make snap decisions and act on impulse.

References

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