5 Steps to Good Decision-Making Skills for Teens

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Making decisions is a skill that teens will need to learn to do well because the decisions they are making in this life stage can be life-altering. Whether or not to get a job, start smoking, use drugs, go to college, start dating or have sex are decisions that teenagers are making everyday. Mix in the decisions of whether or not to study for an upcoming test, which leads to good grades, which leads to college choices and you will begin to see the scope of why your teen needs to learn to make his/her own decisions. Plus, good decision making skills help teens achieve with less stress, as the consequences of poor decision-making skills cause a lot of stress. Here is how you can help your teen learn to make good decisions in five straightforward steps.

Step #1: Prepare yourself. Our first step is all about you, the parent. Are you ready to let your teen take over this decision that you have been making for him/her? Take some time to think it through. While it won't be all at once, there will be a time when it hits you that you aren't always needed for important decisions, or that you may not agree with the decision your teen made yet the situation worked out fine without you. This can cause some melancholy feelings – and proud feelings too. Ah, the mix emotions of being a parent! You need to prepare yourself for it. When these thoughts and feelings hit, it is important to remember that you are doing a good job and your teenager is lucky to have you in his/her life.

Step #2: Help your teen identify a conflict that needs his/her attention. Verbally spell out the conflict and end with a question: “What do you think you could do?” or “What are your options?” Help your teen list a few that he/she may not think of, but don’t do this task for him/her.

Step #3: Encourage your teen to think through each option. Spelling out the pros and cons will help him/her see the big picture of each option, thereby helping him/her choose appropriately. Younger teens often have trouble seeing the big picture, so they may need more help than a 17-year-old. But all teens can use their parents as sounding boards. Be available to listen and help even after your teen has developed good decision-making skills.

Step #4: Allow your teen to make the decision. Hold your tongue just before you’re ready to say, "I think you should..."

Note: If your teen is used to you making the decisions and isn’t getting around to finalizing his thoughts on the options and choosing one, you may want to ask your teen if he/she is worried about ‘being allowed’. Many times at the teen home I would have a teen talk over all of the options and then wait quietly until I told them what they were allowed to choose. An awkward moment or two would follow and then the teen would realize that I wasn’t going to do the choosing and say, "Oh, you want me to choose. I didn’t know I was allowed." So, this is simply solved by verbally giving permission.

Step #5: Reconnect and evaluate the decision with your teen. While you shouldn’t act like this is a business meeting, do talk to your teen about what happened, even if the outcome wasn’t what was hoped for. Discuss what he/she might do differently the next time and do not be judgmental. Give your teen positive feedback and tell him/her that you are proud that he/she took on this challenging decision.

Going through these five steps will help you and your teen work through important decisions in his/her life. While these steps may seem cumbersome at first, soon your teen will be going through them with little thought. This will add to his/her self-confidence and maturity.