



# Involving Your Teen In Decision-Making

*A newsletter for parents of youth in Wisconsin*

## Issue 3: Development and Decision-Making

### Polly, 11

Sometimes Polly shows a real maturity when she plays with her 7-year-old brother. Polly says, "When we start to disagree, I just think how I would have felt about it at his age. I don't get so mad at him anymore." Other days, she is selfish and impatient, and doesn't empathize with her brother at all. Polly's dad wonders, "Why is she grown up one day, and immature the next?"

### Marta, 13

Marta began puberty earlier than her friends, and she looks more like a young woman than a young adolescent. However, she is still "average" for her age in the way she thinks through problems and relates to her friends. When she tells her parents she's ready to start dating, they're not sure how to react. Is she as grown up as she looks?

### Jeremiah, 15

Last semester, Jeremiah got an A+ on a term paper he wrote for health class called "Risks of Getting STDs through Unprotected Sex." Last week, he confided to his mom that he had sex a few times, and didn't use condoms. His mom doesn't understand why Jeremiah would do something that he clearly understands is risky.

### Rodney, 17

Unlike most of his classmates, Rodney doesn't need to shave yet, and his voice hasn't changed. However, his critical thinking skills are advanced; he even takes a college-level philosophy course. He gets frustrated when he goes to work after school at the family business because his uncles never take his suggestions seriously. He hates that they still treat him like a kid.

**D**ecision-making with a teenage child can be challenging. Just when you've figured out how much freedom to give and where to draw the line, your child changes. His body, mind, values, relationship skills, and control over his feelings all become more adult-like. Development gives young people new decision-making abilities. On pages 2 and 3, we explain how teens develop in four areas or "domains": physical, cognitive, moral, and social/emotional. We discuss how these changes can affect decision-making and what parents can do to support this process. But wait... there's more!

To *truly* understand how adolescents make decisions, we have to realize that development happens at different speeds across the four areas. Also, these domains do not all have the same amount of influence on decision-making. Which area will have the most powerful influence depends on how mature your teenager is in each of the four areas, and on the nature of the situation that calls for a decision. This is not as complicated as it sounds if you consider what influences the decision-making of the teens in the stories on the left.

Marta's parents and Rodney's uncles are confused about how to interpret physical maturity as a sign of readiness for decision-making. While Marta *looks* ready for important choices, she isn't yet. Rodney, on the other hand, looks young, but has the maturity necessary to participate in complex decisions. The stories of Jeremiah and Polly illustrate how teenagers do not show the same level of maturity from day to day, nor in all decisions. This is why teens sometimes make "good" choices and other times make "bad" ones.

# Parents Provide Support

Buildings under construction need scaffolding until they are strong enough to stand on their own. Teenagers need a kind of scaffolding too. You can support their growth by role-modeling and asking questions to help them through the decision-making process. You can set limits to keep them safe. And you can provide them with opportunities to practice, by letting them make decisions that have a developmentally-appropriate level of risk. As youths mature, you can take down the scaffolding bit by bit and let them stand on their own.

Just like a building under construction needs scaffolding, your teen needs support to learn the skills to make good decisions independently.



# Domains of Development

## What's happening?

Hormonal changes cause adolescents' bodies to pass through puberty into sexual maturity. Growth spurts are common. All young people do not mature at the same time, but teens tend to compare themselves with others to see if they are "normal." This leads many adolescents to feel self-conscious. Additionally, as their bodies become sexually mature, teens gain interest in being attractive to others, and worry more about their appearance. They often feel pressured to act sexually in response to media images.

## How can development influence decision making?

Teens may be motivated to choose options that make them look good or attractive. Likewise, they can make choices that protect them from feeling undesirable or ugly. It can be difficult for some teens to pay attention to their thoughts and feelings when sexual desire is strong. Also, fluctuating hormone levels can cause rapid mood swings, which can interfere with thinking through a decision rationally.

## What can parents do to support good decision-making?

Keep in mind that as your teen matures physically, his or her reasoning behind a decision may be motivated by the desire to be attractive to others. While you may find this reason less than worthy, it's important to understand that for a teenager, forming an intimate bond with another person is an important developmental task. It's normal and healthy for adolescents to be concerned with this. In addition, feeling likable and desirable helps them build a positive identity. If you recognize when you and your teen are approaching a decision with different goals in mind, you may find it easier to talk.

Physical

## What's happening?

As the brain grows during adolescence, thinking skills improve. Teenagers become able to think about several ideas at one time, to think abstractly, and to imagine the future. They also gain the ability to think rationally about emotions.

## How can development influence decision making?

These changes give teens new abilities to think through decisions and not rely solely upon their emotions. They can brainstorm and compare numerous solutions to a problem.

## What can parents do to support good decision-making?

Parents can help teens use their rational thinking skills by teaching the decision-making process (see the back page). This teaching happens through role-modeling, so when your kids watch you make a decision, try to "think out loud." It also happens when you help teens reflect on their own decision-making by asking questions, and when you engage in an "intellectual" give-and-take when making decisions together.

Cognitive

### What's happening?

While adolescents want to maintain strong, connected relationships with their parents, peers become increasingly important to them. They want to spend more time with friends, belong to groups, and build more personal and intimate relationships. They also are questioning "Who am I?" and may try on different identities to see which one suits them best.

### How can development influence decision making?

The desire to maintain social connections is very powerful for teenagers, and this can become the primary motivator behind decisions. The same is true of wanting to promote a certain image or identity in order to fit in. Girls especially may have trouble making decisions based on what they really want, when they feel pressured not to make others angry. Boys may have difficulty allowing emotions to play any role in decision-making, in fear that this would be seen as a sign of weakness.

### What can parents do to support good decision-making?

Though all parents know about "peer pressure," it may be hard to remember just how important social relationships and a good image are to young people. Teens do not want to make decisions they think will make them look foolish in front of their peers because this contradicts everything they are trying to accomplish as they develop socially and emotionally. Help teens come up with options that can protect their friendships, their identity, *and* their safety. Parents of girls should pay special attention to helping girls have a voice. (Don't let them escape a decision with "I don't know.") Parents of boys should work to make it safe for boys to share their emotions, and to use their feelings as one source of information for decision-making.

### What's happening?

Adolescents start to "internalize" or take ownership of their values and religious beliefs. They often show an increased interest in politics, philosophy, religion, and connection in relationships. They move beyond just accepting their parents' beliefs, and begin to define which standards are important for their own life and identity. Teenagers become more able to understand the reasons for rules and to see that things are not always "black and white." They also increasingly consider other people's perspectives, and can empathize more.

### How can development influence decision making?

Their decision-making is no longer based only on "following the rules." They increasingly think about why rules exist and evaluate whether or not rules are just and worth following. In addition, they are concerned with maintaining important relationships (with both parents and friends), and worry about how their decisions will affect relationships.

### What can parents do to support decision-making?

If your teen questions or criticizes your actions or reasons for making a decision, try to remember that increased interest in the reasons for things is a normal and healthy part of adolescent development. Instead of taking it as a challenge, try offering honest answers, then asking your teen what solutions she would propose and why. Asking "Why?" helps you understand her moral reasoning, shows your teen that you're listening, and reassures her that you want to stay connected, even when you disagree. Also try to take advantage of times when your teen questions right from wrong to discuss together the complexities and consequences of decisions. And remember that your teenager is trying to become his own person, separate from you. If he works carefully through a decision, praise his good reasoning, even if he chooses a solution that you wouldn't.

# The Decision-Making Process

Decisions are often emotional, so how can you help teens use rational thinking in decision-making? The next time you and your teen have a decision to make, talk through the process out loud, step by step.

## Step 1: Define the problem

*"Hmm, I have double-booked my schedule for Thursday night. I am supposed to go to a neighborhood block meeting AND work some overtime hours."*

- React to the situation
- Think about the situation
- Precisely describe the problem

## Step 2: Think of options

*"I could either skip the meeting, or try to get someone else to work for me."*

- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Search for new information
- Weigh the accuracy and credibility of different sources of information

## Step 3: Consider consequences

*"I hate to miss another meeting, but I really need to earn some extra money. Plus, I want to stay on my boss's good side. I think it's best if I go to work."*

- Describe the advantages and disadvantages of each option
- Think about possible consequences

## Step 4: Choose a solution

*"I'll call the meeting chairwoman and tell her I can't come; maybe she can catch me up on neighborhood news on Friday."*

- Be willing to make a choice from among different options
- Plan how to implement the decision
- Be committed to the selected alternative

## Step 5: Evaluate the decision

*"It looks like I didn't miss too much at the meeting. And that overtime pay sure is helpful."*

- Pay attention to the outcomes of the decision
- Evaluate how good a decision was compared to alternatives
- Understand the need to use information in future decision-making



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