

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning at Home

This Week's Focus – Decision Making

What is Decision Making?

Consider this quote from John C. Maxwell, "Life is a matter of choices, and every choice you make makes you." If you agree with Maxwell that we are defined, at least in part, by the choices we make, then helping our children learn to make good choices is very important. The social and emotional skill called Decision Making is about how we solve problems and make choices that are based on our values, how we accept responsibility for our decisions and their consequences, and how we learn from experience. Here are some suggestions to help your child build this critical skill set:

Elementary Students – Pause Power - Pause Power¹ is a decision making strategy that has two parts. It begins with identifying what is really important to us; that is, what are the principles that we want to live our life by. So, start by helping your child identify what is most important for them. It might be "telling the truth," or "being a good friend." You can help them identify what's really important, but make sure it's what is important to them, not you. Second, help your child develop a habit of pausing when they are faced with an important decision and thinking about what's most important to them and then using those principles to guide their decision. This will help them avoid making impulsive decisions or being overly influenced by peer pressure. If your child's decision reflects what's really important to them, they will feel better about that decision and so will you. So, when you see your child struggling with a decision, remind them to use their *Pause Power*. With practice it will become a habit that will help them make decisions based on their values and their true selves.

Middle and High School Students – Examining Close Calls- Phew, that was a close call! How many times have we experienced a close call in our life? What's interesting is how we respond to close calls. As Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe point out in their book, *Managing the Unexpected*, we tend to think of a close call as a positive outcome or success. Barely passing the test shows that we studied enough; being the last person selected for a team shows that we are a good enough athlete. At a minimum we chalk it up to luck and move on. What we don't do often enough is *Examine the Close Call* as a failure nearly avoided to see what we can learn from it.

As our children become teenagers, they will find themselves in more risk-filled situations such as driving a car, staying out later, or going on unchaperoned trips with friends. They are likely to have close calls such as a car accident that was barely avoided. We need to encourage our adolescents to not just learn from their mistakes, but to learn from their *Close Calls*. Help them think through what could have happened, what led to that situation and what they can do differently in the future to avoid that situation. A *Close Call* is a gift, but only if we examine and learn from it. So, encourage your adolescent to *Examine a Close Call* as a kind of failure they can learn from, not as a success that they should feel good about. Like all social and emotional skills this practice can serve them well throughout their life.

¹ The *Pause Power* strategy was developed by Ann McKay Bryson and is part of the DESSA Comprehensive SEL System.

Preschool Children – Play and Problem-solving - Parents can support young children's skills around decision-making and problem-solving through actively engaging in a child's play experiences. Let your child take the lead and ask questions to help them express their ideas and decisions. Ask questions like, "What you are doing?" and "I wonder how you did that?". When your child's play leads to frustration or disappointment, talk out loud about what decisions they could make and how they might problem solve the situation. Ask questions like, "What could you do instead?" or "I wonder how else this could work." Parents who are actively engaged in a child's play and who take the child's lead are creating fun and interesting play opportunities that are simultaneously teaching children decision making and problem-solving skills.

Infants/Toddlers – Encourage Exploration - As they grow, infants and toddlers start trying to do more things for themselves. As they begin to think and act on their own, they will show interest in exploring their surroundings. Infants and toddlers need many opportunities to learn and practice new skills. They become more independent when the important, trusted adults in their lives allow them to safely explore their worlds. Adults who are close by and provide a safe base for them to "check in" are setting the stage for young children to gain confidence. Parents who provide safe opportunities for exploration are setting the foundation for children to trust in their ability to make decisions.

A Note to Parents

No matter the age of your child, children learn invaluable lessons from parents who share their life experiences. Parents should talk about all kinds of decisions including difficult ones, poor decisions that resulted in negative outcomes, and wise decisions that resulted in success. Of course, the conversations will vary based on your child's age, but it is never too early or too late to start the discussions.

Promoting Social and Emotional Learning at Home is brought to you by Aperture Education (www.ApertureEd.com) and The Devereux Center for Resilient Children (www.CenterforResilientChildren.org). Feel free to visit our websites for additional ideas.

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