

Making Smart Decisions

Your child has to make more and more choices as he grows up: which courses to take, how to handle relationships, whether to get a job, what to do after high school. You can help by giving him tools he needs to make good decisions. Try these tips.



Discussion

Stay alert for opportunities to talk with your teen. She may not open up often, so be ready to listen when she does. Restate what she says, and keep your tone casual (“It sounds like you aren’t sure you want to be around Lily since she’s spending time with kids who drink”).



If you sense that your child is struggling with a decision but she won’t talk, try some conversation starters. You might share an article you read on the subject (“I read the other day that 25 percent of 14-year-olds have tried alcohol”). Or

ask a question: “I haven’t heard much about Lily lately. What’s going on with her?”

Note: Don’t hesitate to be direct if you think your high schooler is in trouble. *Example:* “I’m afraid you’re experimenting with alcohol. We need to talk.”

Experience

Decision making takes plenty of practice. Give your teen choices that aren’t critical so she’ll feel comfortable with the process when she has to make more serious decisions. *Examples:* Should she spend one afternoon a week volunteering at the animal shelter or taking swimming lessons? Should she cut her hair short or leave it long?

Encourage your child to think through her decisions. For instance, working at an animal shelter would give her experience and help her decide if she might enjoy a career as a veterinarian. If she takes swimming lessons, she may be able to try out for the team.

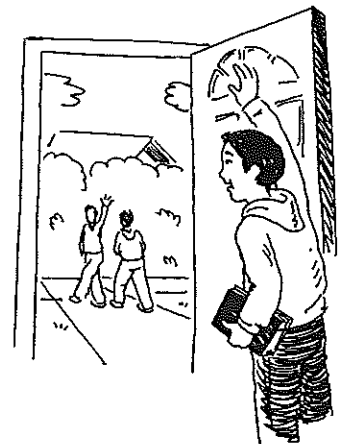
After your teen makes a choice, help her learn from the experience. If she’s unhappy with her haircut, you might say, “It’ll grow out soon, and next time you can try something different.”

Confidence

Teens with good self-esteem can make decisions more easily than those who are concerned about what others think of their choices.

If your child is struggling with peer pressure while making a decision, help him put it in perspective. For example, maybe he wants to join the school chorus but is afraid of what his basketball teammates will think. You might ask him if he’d rather spend an hour every day in an elective he doesn’t like as much or brush off his teammates’ comments and enjoy singing all year.

Or maybe he’s torn between whether to go out with friends on Saturday or to stay home to study for a test. Remind him that he’ll have plenty of other opportunities to spend time with friends and that he’ll feel proud when he does well on his test.



continued



Information

It's easier to make a decision—and feel good about it—if your child has the facts to back it up. For example, deciding to say no to dangerous behavior like trying drugs is challenging for teens.

Together, look up the effects of various drugs (memory loss, heart problems, addiction). Talk about how drug use can affect her schoolwork and friendships (her grades could drop, she might lose friends who don't use drugs). Then, discuss ways for her to say no. *Examples:* "No, thanks. My parents would ground me for the rest of my life!" "No way. I'll be kicked off the team if I get caught."

Support

High schoolers don't have to make choices alone. Encourage your child to build a network of people who can help him with decisions. Trusted teachers and coaches, his guidance counselor, your religious leader, good friends, and, of course, his parents and other relatives can all help him.

For example, suggest that he get to know his guidance counselor. That way, he'll feel more comfortable approaching her when he's choosing a college major or figuring out how to handle a classmate who's pressuring him to cheat.

Tip: Encourage your teen to find a support group of peers (SADD, Alateen) who can help him make good choices, like staying safe on prom night or speaking up when a friend is driving unsafely. He can check with churches or hospitals or look in your local newspaper for groups, meeting locations, and times.

Imagination

Teach your teen to be creative by considering unusual solutions when making a decision.

For instance, maybe she's deciding between getting a part-time job and joining the school computer club. She might be able to do both if she chooses a job with flexible



hours. Encourage her to talk to older kids who have worked in different types of jobs. She may discover that working as a tutor or a babysitter, for instance, would allow her to set hours that wouldn't interfere with club activities.

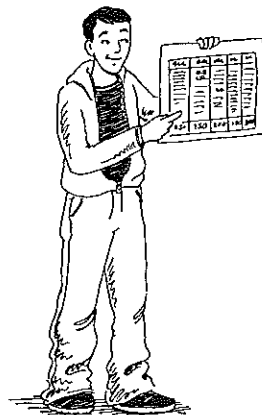
Or suppose she wants to save her money for a new pair of running shoes. She might decide to create a budget for her allowance money. By cutting expenses (eating at home instead of buying fast food, for example), she may find that she has more money for things she needs.

Options

Be sure your child considers all possibilities when he's making an important decision. For example, when deciding on college, help him see what's out there so he can choose the college that's right for him.

Suggest that he research his options and come up with a system for evaluating each one. Does he want to attend a big school or a small school? Would he like to be close to home or farther away? Suggest that he assign a point value to each attribute. School size might be worth 5 points, while weather equals 1 point. He can add up each school's points and rank them from highest to lowest.

Encourage your teen to try this system for other choices, such as which sport to play, how to spend birthday money, or what subject to major in.



Negotiation

If you and your high schooler disagree on an important decision, try to reach a compromise. Perhaps she wants to date a boy you believe is too old for her. Tell her that she can invite him home for dinner or go to the movies in a group. But you might draw the line at allowing her to get into his car or to spend time alone with him.

Or if she wants a tattoo and you're opposed, you might suggest that she get a temporary henna tattoo. Explain your reasoning:

"When you're older, you can make more permanent decisions for yourself. For now, let's think of a temporary way you can try a new look."

Tip: Let your teen know that you're proud of her for becoming more independent. Listen to the reasons behind her decisions, and set a date for revisiting ones that you veto. *Example:* "Next summer we'll talk about one-on-one dating again."

High School Years