

As teachers, we often find it is easier and quicker to tell children what to do and how to think than to teach children how to make decisions for themselves. But consider the implications: Where will students learn to grapple with moral decision-making if not in our classrooms? Who will guide them through the intricate process of conscience formation? Within what framework will they learn about the consequences of their choices?

Upon reflection, it's easy to see that one of the best ways students can learn to make choices is by getting lots of practice within a positive environment where God's guidelines for living are clearly spelled out and modeled, and where choice-making is encouraged and supported.

There are many things children cannot choose: who is in their family, where they live, what their parents' occupations are or which school they attend. But a quick survey of choices children make every day every at school should remind us of ways their choices are being reinforced, for good or ill. The choices students make now will either help or hinder them in learning how to make significant decisions for the future. Look for ways to offer children practice in making appropriate choices.

Why Teach Children About Decision Making?

To develop responsibility and the ability to make godly choices. A child will not be under the guidance of his or her parents and teachers forever. At some point the child must set his or her own course, start a new family and possibly move far away. In a few very brief years, students must make choices that show their desire and ability (or lack thereof) to serve God and humanity. Making small choices now will give a child knowledge and experience that build into greater ability to make important decisions later in life.

To develop confidence. A child who is not allowed to make little choices now will not feel that he or she can make good decisions later on in life. A child who is told constantly what to do can be easily swayed by other people, and later may become resentful or angry about the choices made for them. A child without experience or confidence in decision-making may make bad choices based on rebellion, emotion or lack of information.

To facilitate positive attitudes and behavior. Classroom discipline problems can be averted when children choose what they want to do from among options you provide. Letting children make small choices in class will give them ownership of their learning and maintain their interest in class, as well as promoting positive qualities that will carry over into adult attitudes and experience.

How Do I Teach About Decision Making?

Provide active learning. In the classroom, children will be more interested when they have some control over their learning. Allow children the opportunity to make choices in class:

- Choose between two activities prepared in the classroom.
- Choose colors, materials, or method of expression for art projects.
- Decide which acting part to play in a Bible story script.

Choices: Teaching About Decision Making

- Decide on a team name for a game.
- Select a service project for the class.
- Design a banner or a logo for the class.

With active learning, be sure that all the students have an opportunity to make decisions. Be careful that one or two strong-willed students don't intimidate the more quiet children.

Plan age-appropriate choices. Let young children make small choices (write or draw their answers to questions, which section of a mural on which to draw, etc.) and increase decision-making responsibilities as the children grow older (choice of research topic or service project).

Be supportive. Students may not make the best or most rational decisions, but affirm a student's choice whenever possible: as long as it is not disruptive, is not harmful to the child or others, and is not morally wrong.

Experience consequences. When students make a choice that is less than perfect but causes no physical or emotional harm to them or their peers, let them experience the consequences. Adults who constantly protect a child or cover for a child's mistake will not let the child learn the actual results of behavior. If a child is regularly late to class, don't wait to start a fun activity. If two children constantly distract each other, then tell those children they will need to be separated for a while. When children see that their behavior has undesirable consequences, they learn to make better choices.

Distinguish between good and evil. To make good moral choices, children need to know what God expects! While God allows people to choose their actions, His established behavior standards never change. Teach children what God expects from His children.

Use Scriptural examples. Holy Scripture shows the consequences of good and bad decisions. The Israelites chose to worship an idol and God punished them. Abraham chose to believe God's promise and God made a great nation of his offspring. Use Bible stories to show children what great things can happen when decisions are made that honor God.

Role-play choices and consequences. Older students can act out difficult situations, such as when they see another student cheating on a test or are offered drugs. Discuss different possible endings to the situations and challenge students to make the best choices.

Model good decision-making. Relate stories from your own life whenever appropriate. Use current news stories from the media to discuss good and bad choices. Involve "guest speakers" from your parish or elsewhere to engage and inspire students on difficult issues; allow students to interview the speakers about their choices.

The possibilities for offering students practice in making good choices are infinite—and so are the benefits to your students.