

Helping Youth Learn How to Make Choices

Hello – this is Tami Eggers with Routt County CSU Extension.

Everyday children and teenagers are faced with countless decisions.

Some are simple; like what to do afterschool, while others can be more difficult; like deciding whether or not to attend a party where there will be alcohol. As a parent or leader working with youth, it is important to prepare children and teenagers to make positive choices. The decisions children, and especially teenagers, make now will determine the path that their lives take.

Young children learn decision making through practice. So, as a parent or leader working with young children it is important to give children the opportunity to make decisions. However, it is important to take into account developmental level when teaching positive decision making skills. For example, when children are in a new environment (like a busy store) with an abundance of stimulation, it can be difficult for them to make a choice about which toy they want. To avoid overstimulation, get down on their level, be calm, and limit the selection of options to two or three choices. Only offering two or three choices will help make decision making easier for young children.

As children get older and decisions get more difficult, one of the most important factors of decision-making to learn is how to judge the risk

and rewards of a decision, especially keeping in mind both the long-run and the short-run consequences. One way to help do this is through modeling behavior. By demonstrating your ability to make small decisions (like what shoes to wear) easily, but taking the time to look at the benefits and consequences of a bigger decision, will help youth learn these skills as well. For example, when making a big decision, think out loud about positives and negatives for the short term and long term. This will help youth learn the process and what goes into decision making.

Also, try sitting down with youth to go through situations where difficult decisions might need to be made. For instance, what should teenagers do when someone offers them a beer at a party? By going through the short-term and long-term effects of either drinking the beer or turning it down, it can help youth become more prepared for making healthy choices.

One of the most important jobs of a parent or leader working with youth is preparing them for adulthood. One way to prepare youth is through teaching them positive decision making skills. By learning to make choices, and make mistakes, children and youth learn who they are and what they like and do not like. This skill will help youth grow up into responsible adults.

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