

# HOW TO HELP KIDS MAKE DECISIONS

## Things To Do:

- Model good decision-making. Talk to kids about decisions you're faced with, and explain the steps you go through in making a decision. (For instance: joining or not joining the PTA, buying a car or house, choosing a vacation time and place, changing jobs.) Ask them to help you identify your feelings, brainstorm your options, sort out and then evaluate pros and cons. Allow them to become involved in the decisions we adults face.
- Be a resource. Rather than giving kids solutions or directions because we're sure we know what's best, be there as a resource to help them go through the four big steps in making their own decisions. (For instance: choices of friends, whom to date, extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, spending their money.) Mark is faced with whether to save his earnings for a car or to take a trip out West with friends. Let them make the choice, but help him sort out his options and their long-term ramifications.
- Encourage kids to investigate pros and cons playing "what if". They enjoy the game, and it's an education. (For instance: What if I ask the girl my best friend likes to go to the game with me? What if I'm asked to be a cheerleader and my best friend isn't? What if the boy I like wants me to smoke a joint? What if my best friend shoplifts while I'm with her?)
- Allow kids to make mistakes. We'd never learn to ride a bike if we didn't risk a few spills. So allow kids to make some choices you don't really agree with. (For instance: Joey decides to quit his after-school job as a result of an argument with his boss. You may think it's a mistake, but Joey has to make the choice. Of course, if he has agreed to have an after-school job in order to earn his own spending money, he'll be expected to look for another one.)
- Encourage kids to get involved in a personal growth group, or in various activities where they'll have opportunities to make decisions and help others make decisions. (For instance: church youth groups, Scouting programs, personal-growth groups, youth leadership groups such student council, Kiwanis Key Club, and other youth service organizations.)
- Look for opportunities to discuss decision-making with your kids, especially in a risk-free environment where unwise choices don't really do any harm. TV programs, movies, comic books, the daily newspaper all offer many opportunities to second-guess choices others have made. (For instance, a few from books: Was Peter

Rabbit smart in leaving the briar patch all that day? Was Little Red Riding Hood smart going into the forest alone? Should Huck Finn have left home?) It's easy to choose examples to fit the age and capacities of the kids, on topics ranging from little decisions made in kids' stories to major decisions about marriage, divorce, world poverty and hunger, war, and global environmental problems, not to mention decisions that famous athletes and entertainers have made about using alcohol/drugs.

- Be interested in longer-term outcomes of what kids are doing. Give them encouragement by praise and other rewards for completing projects or activities they've begun; many kids have great initial enthusiasm but soon give up. (For instance: encourage kids who persevere in building a model airplane, in sticking with piano lessons or art projects or saving money for a long-term purchase.)
- Actually work side by side with your kids in projects that require a long time, stamina, and patience to complete. (For instance: building a model car, becoming involved in a hobby such as fishing, woodworking, sewing, or needlecraft.) As the project unfolds, help them be invested in it by asking them how they think the two of you should go about it, and by letting them make critical choices on such matters as selecting materials and colours. Encourage them by praising their enthusiasm, their self-discipline, their perseverance in sticking with a difficult, lengthy task.

### **Things to Avoid:**

- Don't make decisions your kids should make such as whom to date, what clothes to buy, whether to save money for school or buy the new CD player. Even though we probably know what's best for them, it's never productive to interfere in choices that are truly their responsibility. The goal of parenting, after all, is to prepare kids to face the real world. So we have to involve them in situations where they learn real lifeskills that will actually help them deal effectively with everyday situations. By learning the importance of being on time for school, football practice or babysitting jobs, they're developing the skills to succeed in their first full-time job, where the stakes suddenly have become much higher.
- Don't lecture. Listen. Our role in the process of our kids' decision making is essentially that of being a resource and a sounding board. Don't become the authority. Kids learn only by doing. Only if Johnny decides to save money for a long-term purchase will it really mean anything to him. Otherwise it's just another example of doing "what the Old Lady makes me do."