Decision-making: early childhood

The way adults interact with young children is very important for their emerging decision-making and problem-solving skills.

How do decision-making skills develop?

Learning the skills for making good decisions takes time.

These skills are influenced by the expectations and values that children learn from those around them. This occurs when they observe others, hear about and discuss values, and have opportunities to make choices and experience their consequences.

Young children are still developing many of their social and emotional learning skills. Because of this they are more likely to:

- focus on one aspect of a situation
- focus on their own position
- look for immediate benefits
- want things now
- act without thinking first
- make simple distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong

- make decisions based on a whim.

A good decision is one that's most likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone concerned.

By talking children through the steps of decision-making, you can motivate them to think through their choices and understand the important things to consider when making decisions. Start with simple choices and gradually build up to bigger, more complex problem-solving as children's capabilities and skills improve.

Key steps in the decision-making process

1. Work out the problem: Help the child identify and label their feelings so that they can understand the problem.

2. Plan to solve the problem: Depending on their age and abilities, prompt or help them to brainstorm solutions. Talk about what might happen with each possible solution. This encourages children to consider different solutions before choosing what to do next.

3. Do something about it: Sometimes a child will need your support to take action, or the reassurance that you're nearby. As they get older, children will be able to do more problem-solving themselves and let you know how they go later.

Check back

Ask the child about the choice they made – did it help or not? This is important – if you don't check back and show the child how to try again, they may lose an opportunity to learn, or lose confidence in your capacity to help them.

Strategies for early childhood educators

From birth, children gain confidence when adults provide gentle guidance and, over time, encourage them to take reasonable responsibility for themselves. You can:

Provide a loving, safe, predictable and responsive environment: In this environment, children can explore and practise making decisions.

Create opportunities for symbolic play: Symbolic play boosts thinking and problem-solving skills. Children think creatively during this kind of play. They learn how to negotiate with each other and to hold several things in mind at once. Symbolic play stimulates basic skills that mature into the ability to organise play, think things through and cope with feelings.

Model planning skills: Being able to think ahead and plan helps with problem-solving and decision-making. This ability begins in infancy and develops over the first few years. You can model planning, talking aloud as you plan, and giving children chances to practise planning in ways they can manage.

Play games and tell stories: Toddlers love 'peek-a-boo', 'hide and seek', and games where they can copy each other's actions. These games help children build on thinking and planning skills. Preschool children like to play games like 'Simon says' and 'statues', which require them to use self-control and think before they act. While telling and reading stories, children learn to think ahead when adults stop and ask them things like "What might happen next?" or "What would be a different ending?"

Practise learning: Give children the opportunity to:

- practise decision-making from as young as possible

- try things and succeed (this builds self-esteem)

- learn from mistakes

- practise attending to a task (by breaking it down into small sections they can complete and achieve).

Learn about decision-making skills strategies for school educators here.

References

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2018). Core SEL competencies. Chicago: CASEL. Retrieved from https://casel.org/core-competencies/