

Guiding Our Kids' Decision Making Independence

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As children gain the social and emotional skills to manage their daily responsibilities, they slowly learn how to become more independent in their decision-making skills at home and at school. Initially, they learn how to play responsibly in their home and in their backyard. They will eventually learn how to play in their front yard. Depending on traffic and the location of their neighborhood, primary grade students must learn how to cross busy streets to visit friends and travel to school. Independent decision making skills with predetermined consequences expand as children enter middle school and start socializing with their friends at public places while taking public transportation.

The path to becoming independent is slow and continuous. During children's early years in school, parents can help their children identify how they can complete their daily responsibilities. Some parents and teachers create an expanded list of activities that must be completed daily. This "star chart" can help each child identify specific responsibilities that must be completed daily. The list can include how each child will manage their personal care, household chores, and

school homework and preparations.

Expanding Independence

As children are able to manage their daily lives, they can expand their independence within their home and outside. When playing outside, primary age school children can visit neighborhood friends with a predetermined plan of when they need to check-in for accountability. Some children need to check-in hourly. Others can complete a two-hour playdate and be home by 5 p.m. for homework and chores. It is important to agree on how children will communicate with their parents when playing in the neighborhood. Most parents have their children periodically come home while others ask their children to phone them at a specific time.

Middle School Growth Opportunities

As children enter the middle school years, their need for independence is critical for personal growth. Today's parents are challenged with safety concerns that include inappropriate television options, internet crimes, addictive gaming, and community safety issues. Parents and their middle school children must structure afterschool and summer days to balance their children's need for independence while staying safe and accountable.

Managing Schedules

As parents help their children structure their days, the kids can create an expand calendared that lists each daily activity and an appropriate timeline for completing various tasks. Parents can also evaluate their own use of time using a worksheet. These accountability worksheets help parents determine how and when their children are ready for more independence. Parents can also help their children by:

- Monitoring safety within specific neighborhoods and communities
- Becoming active in neighborhood watches
- Learning about community policing activities
- Providing added help to families who need extended childcare support
- Preparing for neighborhood disaster relief support

Modeling Effective Problem-Solving and Resiliency Skills

When children start school, it is essential to learn healthy resiliency skills to ensure that they can care for themselves and learn independently at school. Parents must model and teach their children how to self-regulate their frustrations, anger, and disappointments in healthy ways. It is important to reinforce effective problem-solving strategies and teach children how to negotiate and problem-solve when conflicts occur. Basic skills for effective problem-solving include:

- Take the time to listen with care and concern. Show empathy.
- Coach and guide children to consider the various perspectives of a problem.
- Have them identify possible solutions and consider or list the benefits or limits of each situation.
- Identify their best solution for a specific situation.
- Encourage them to try out the solution.
- Ask them to report back on how the solution worked for them.
- Consider other options or have children modify a solution if needed.
- Reflect back what was learned about effective problem-solving and resiliency skill development.

Managing Challenges

As children develop effective problem-solving skills, they can also learn how to stay calm as they trouble shoot challenging situations. Parents can model and coach them to learn how to overcome difficult times by using the following strategies:

- Be compassionate.
- Focus on the big picture of life and consider the many times life is satisfying.
- Use humor when appropriate and a warm and loving attitude.
- Build in breaks and relief support for balance and reduced stress.
- Journal feelings and consider various outcomes.
- Get help.
- Talk, read, sing, and play to reinforce positive feelings.

Respectful Consequences for Conflicts

There must also be consequences for misbehaviors and aggressive reactions to conflict. These may include:

- Clarify natural and logical consequences.
- Offer choices with boundaries.
- Provide timeouts as needed for self-regulating emotions.
- Encourage journaling feelings and reflective discussions.
- Brainstorm solutions.
- Make a plan for a logical consequence when appropriate.
- Follow up and adjust a corrective action as needed.

These problem-solving strategies can be used for resolving conflicts and building resiliency in children. They can also guide parents in a specific problem solution process.

Much success as you and your child partner together as you nurture their independence and resolve conflicts through effective problem-solving strategies.

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