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Teens Making Choices: Practice is Important

By Rosalie Bakken, Adolescent Development Specialist

Today's youth are put into situations where they must make important, often split-second decisions about things like cigarette or alcohol use, breaking laws, or whether to join in activities that are hurtful — or helpful and respectful — of others. We all hope that our youth will not hesitate to do the right thing in these situations.

Adults can help prepare youth to make good, healthy choices. Kids and teens learn best through practice, so give youth chances to practice making decisions under your guidance. Start by giving kids responsibility for making choices on matters that involve little or no risk, such as how to style their hair, hobbies, etc. As youth grow, they are

capable of taking responsibility for decisions on more important matters.

Even preteens will benefit from the experience of working through some tough decisions on their own. Parents should step in if a decision involves serious risk, but otherwise, it is important to let youth take responsibility and experience the consequences, both good and bad, of their choices.

Are you giving youth chances to practice making decisions on their own? Are you giving your youth too much responsibility or freedom before he or she is ready for it? This activity may help you think about these issues.

1. Make a list of some of the tough choices your youth may face in the future.

2. When faced with a difficult decision, I believe my youth is capable of making a smart decision:

almost always _____ usually _____ sometimes _____ occasionally _____ almost never _____

3. My youth is currently responsible for making the following decisions on her or his own: (i.e. bedtime, after-school activities, spending allowance, etc.)

4. What decisions do I make for my youth? (i.e. curfew, dating, driving privileges, etc.)

5. What decisions do I want to start talking about more often with my teen? (i.e. dating, drug use, college plans, etc.)

6. In the future, I am going to involve my youth more in decisions about: (i.e. how my teen spends money, curfew, etc.)

7. I will do this by:

_____ Explaining reasons for my decisions to my youth

_____ Asking youth for their input

_____ Considering the changing needs of my youth

_____ Adjusting rules as my teen matures

_____ Turning over responsibility to youth

Teens won't always make the choices parents want them to, but when families make it a habit to openly discuss even tough issues, teens are more likely to think before they act. By giving youth a chance to practice under your wing, you are giving them skills for a lifetime of healthy choices.

Source

Russell, S. & Bakken, R. J. (February 2002). *Development of Autonomy in Adolescence*. NebGuide G1449. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Extension Division.

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