

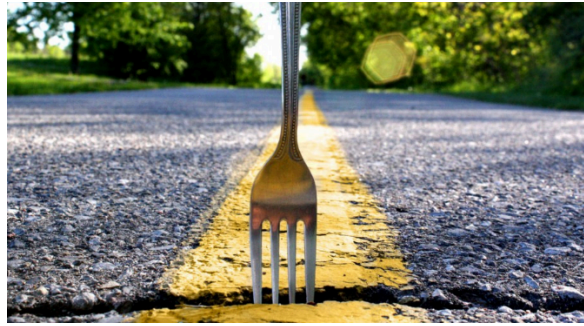


ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Is it Monday Yet? 12/30/22



Teaching our Children the Power of Effective Decision Making

Children make decisions all the time, but brain science research into the age at which these decisions become effective (defined as informed, logical, and adaptive), is spotty. Between the work of cognitive and developmental psychologists such as [Jean Piaget](#) and [Lawrence Kohlberg](#), and the constantly emerging body of evidence generated by [functional MRI](#) research, we continue to draw back the curtain revealing more and more about what is arguably the most human part of our humanity: how we learn to exercise our will when we encounter a fork in the road.

To make matters even more challenging, information we use to make decisions has become so accessible and expansive that it is overwhelming, and is often so “targeted” that it seems predatory. Even as an adult of a certain age, a significant part of the time I spend making decisions is devoted to *evaluating* information gushing from this firehose (requiring the most cognitive bandwidth of all the thinking skills), to resisting the “urgency to decide,” to consciously slowing down, and to painstakingly interrogating my options and their probable outcomes. Ironically, it actually takes me more time than it ever has to make a higher stakes decision *because* I have such easy access to information!

While the act of gathering information to make a decision used to be a slow and sometimes tedious process, itself setting a cadence that dictated careful and deliberate steps towards an ultimate decision, the cacophony of disparate and aggressive voices that are now instantly available via the magic of the internet, pushes the pace and creates the illusion that if I do not decide sooner vs. later, I will miss an opportunity. For our children, not yet seasoned evaluators of information, this FOMO is a powerful motivator that few will

have the developmental capacity to resist: ask any marketer, influencer, or clickbait generator.

Given all we have learned from developmental and cognitive psychology and brain science research, especially in the context of so much information at our fingertips where every click is a decision, what is the best way to support our children as they grow into effective, independent, and moral decision makers, at the same time our role in their lives is evolving from that of managers to consultants?

Below is some advice based upon what Eileen and I learned in raising Molly, Zach, and Ethan, each of whom knows, even as a young adult having reached the stage of “Let Go,” that they can count on us as consultants who always have their best interests at heart.

Model/Evaluate

As adults, we make scores of routine decisions daily. We have grown so accustomed to decision making, in fact, that we sometimes do not even realize we have made a decision. When our children were younger, from the point at which we knew they had the necessary language skills, around 3 years of age, Eileen and I would make it a point to share aloud our decision making “interior monologue,” which might sound something like this:

Should I spend the money on that new pair of work gloves for working in the yard, or will my current gloves make it until my birthday? Then I can ask for a new pair as a gift. These gloves on this website sure are awesome looking, with the fleece lining and all. That said, are they worth the money, and do I really need fleece, or should I spend that money on a new spade, or simply save it and ask for something ELSE for my birthday? There are no holes in my gloves, but they are sometimes uncomfortable and that fleece would add more comfort. Can I make my old gloves more comfortable? Yes, I think I can, if I take better care of them by cleaning them and conditioning the leather. Heck, they may even last BEYOND my birthday... maybe until Christmas, and maybe THEN I can ask Santa for a new pair! I think I'll keep my old gloves. I don't have to decide today, so I'll sleep on it.

This sort of soliloquy became so common, that my children started to joke, “Oh no, here goes Poppy again in decision-making-model!” which very quickly became the shorthand, DMM.

When in DMM, our family's values, rooted in Judeo-Christian belief, provided us an important reference point worth mentioning, and Eileen and I made sure that our children heard how these ideas informed our decision making process. The added benefit here was that, by example rather than exhortation, our children learned to appreciate how our faith was a living resource that played an actual role in our real-life world. Our children understood the code of “I'll sleep on it,” to mean that they'd hear it mentioned in our nightly prayers, which they sometimes had to remind me about. Other reference points could

include values drawn from other faith traditions, from Ashbrook's twelve core values, from Scouting oaths, or from the many "# step decision making models" that you can easily find online (a quick search turned up [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), and [10](#) step systems). More important than the actual plan or particular values your family adopts, having a values based plan is an important step towards supporting children as they develop into effective decision makers.

Practice/Support

As a reference point and/or value system is being internalized by your children, giving them opportunities to practice making their own decisions would be an important next step. For Eileen and me, this took the form of playing dinnertime or travel time "What If?" or "Would you rather..." games, always making sure to end with the question, "WHY did you decide that?" Or manufacturing or drawing attention to simple and very low stakes, natural opportunities our children had to make decisions for themselves. Traveling to grandma's for a daytrip, for example, presented the opportunity to help them decide which stuffy to take or which book to bring in the car. Letting them know that I noticed they had gone into DMM, and having a good laugh about it, reinforced the experience as a teachable moment. In the case of the trip to grandma's, which unexpectedly turned into an overnight, the choice of the wrong stuffy for a sleepover led to a discussion about how we might've decided differently and how we could use this experience to inform our decision the next time we are invited to grandma's house! In this case, considering that grandma often insisted on our spending the night, slowing down a bit and taking the time to consider the upsides and downsides of taking Jimbo the Clown (lots of buttons and zippers) vs. the much more *snuggleable* Clifford the Big Red Dog, might have led to a different choice?

Loosen the Leash/Tighten the Leash

Eventually, the role Eileen and I played at these moments became more and more peripheral, consisting mostly of picking up the pieces for our children by debriefing and "failing forward" following less than effective decision making. What this led to was a period of time, mostly in their mid to later teens, where we would toggle between closer and further proximity to the decision point, in an iterative act that can be likened to alternatively loosening and tightening a leash by moving between listening actively/questioning on the one hand, and offering advice on the other. This liminal back-and-forth between what they needed when they were younger and what they would eventually need to be more independent decision makers, allowed them the space to act on their own bolstered by the confidence that we were there to gently guide them. Admittedly, our lingering at times for too long at the end of a tighter-than-necessary leash, led to their craving more slack, motivating them towards the default of more independent decision making.

Letting Go

As important as the question of when to START helping our children become effective problem solvers, is the question of when to let go. At that point in the development of our

children when the leash had been loose for so long that offering unsolicited advice would have seemed a step backwards, the letting go process had officially commenced (their current stage, now in their early 20s). Of course, though now invisible, the leash will always be there. Indeed, I myself still feel its presence as provided by my own parents, now in their 80s, in terms of the wisdom, the advice, and the sounding board they provide. Knowing that I can count on my parents to play this role is super comforting, especially once I have slept on the penultimate draft of a higher stakes decision.

Ideally, as our children grow older, the growth in their skills as decision makers will keep pace with the importance of the decisions they will be asked to make when coming to their own forks in the road. By supporting our children as they learn to make routine decisions, and helping them learn from their mistakes, they will gain the confidence they need to make effective, independent, and morally responsible decisions. As our children grow in this way and gain the wisdom that results, the skills they have developed as more routine decision makers, will hold them in excellent stead as their decisions become higher and higher stakes and even as they are called on to choose the *least unfavorable* of two unfavorable alternatives, a decision making scenario which often presents as a moral dilemma.

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