



Teaching Our Kids to Make Good Decisions

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**10 WAYS TO
START
A
CONVERSATION
WITH YOUR TEEN**





WAYS TO START A CONVERSATION


1. How has today been so far on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is terrible and 10 is terrific)?
Why?
2. What is something you accomplished this week that you feel good about?
3. What's something you're looking forward to?
4. What's on your mind these days?
5. What's a goal you're working on?




Our children face
many ethical
decisions in their
lives . . .

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- Should I return a lost wallet?
 - Should I cheat on tests if “everybody is doing it”?
 - Should I go to a cool party that my parents wouldn't approve of?
 - Do I have to tell the whole truth if they ask where I've been?
 - A friend of mine is using drugs. What should I do?
 - Should I pick up litter?

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- What should I do if I'm in a group that starts saying mean things about someone they don't like?
 - What should I do if I see some kids at school picking on another kid?
 - Who should I be friends with?
 - What if my new group at school doesn't want me to associate with a girl I've been friends with in the past?

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- Should I have sex with this person if he/she is willing?
 - Who should I ask advice from when I'm trying to decide what's right?



Aristotle pointed out
that good ethical
decisions spring from
our character—the
kind of person we are.




If I am a person of character, an honest person, I will be less likely to be tempted to cheat.


If I am a kind person, I am less likely to be drawn into uncharitable gossip.

If I am a self-disciplined person, I will be less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol or give in to sexual temptation.

If I am a person with a high level of self-worth, I am less likely to give in to social pressure.




Our most important
task in teaching our
children to make
good moral choices is
therefore to help
them develop a
good character.



Raising Children of Character: 10 Principles

1. Make character development a high priority.
2. Be authoritative.
3. Love children.
4. Teach by example.
5. Manage the moral environment.



6. Use Direct Teaching to Develop Habits, Conscience, and Good Judgment

7. Discipline wisely.



8. Solve conflicts fairly.

9. Provide opportunities to practice the virtues.

10. Foster spiritual development.



**What is the
content of
our character?**



TEN ESSENTIAL VIRTUES



1. WISDOM



2. JUSTICE



3. FORTITUDE



4. SELF-CONTROL



5. LOVE



6.

POSITIVE

ATTITUDE



7. HARD WORK



8. INTEGRITY



9. GRATITUDE



10. HUMILITY



Character has 3 parts:

The HEAD


(understanding the virtue)

The HEART

(caring about the virtue)


The HAND

(practicing the virtue).




Virtues are not mere thoughts, but habits we develop by performing virtuous actions.

—Aristotle




**Children develop
character by what they
see, what they hear, and
what they are repeatedly
led to do.**

—James Stenson



Directed practice is the *most* important influence in helping kids develop the habits of good character.



TEACHING DECISION MAKING



We create our character by the choices we make.

Every time you make a choice, you affect the kind of person you are becoming.


Good choices create good habits, and therefore good character.



Hal Urban, an award-winning teacher:

Life is a series of choices we get to make.

- We're free to choose how to treat other people. We can put them down or build them up.
- We're free to choose how much we'll learn. We can look on learning as an unpleasant activity—or as a great opportunity to better ourselves.

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- We're free to choose our belief system and purpose in life.
 - We're free to choose our attitude, regardless of the circumstances.
 - We're free to choose our character. We can become less than we're capable of, or all that we're capable of.




Life's

Greatest Lessons


(Simon & Schuster, 2003)

—Hal Urban



Our **conscience** is a big part of character. Conscience includes:

- *Making a judgment* that applies standards of right and wrong to our own conduct
- *Feeling obligated* to do the right thing.




With respect to conscience,
we have *two* duties:

- First, to *form* our conscience correctly.
- Then to *follow* our conscience faithfully.

How do we know what actions are right?


1. Right actions affirm human dignity.
2. They promote the happiness and well-being of the individual.
3. They serve the common good.
4. They meet the test of reversibility. (*Would I want this done to me?*)
5. They can be universalized. (*Would I want all people to act in this way?*)



One 10-year-old boy said:

"A conscience is the part of your mind that has the job of decision-maker. My conscience appears just before an incident occurs.

"Most of the time I listen to it, but sometimes my conscience sleeps through an incident."



What are the
origins of
conscience?

Lost wallet study

Each wallet contained \$50 and the name and phone number of the owner.

Wallets were left on sidewalks, and in phone booths; in front of office buildings, discount stores, and churches; and in parking lots and restaurants.

Lost Wallet Study

Worldwide, out of 1,100 wallets:

- 56% were returned with the contacts intact.
- 44% were not.

The return rate varied widely among countries (in Norway and Denmark, 100% were returned) and among cities and towns in the *same* country.


Lost wallet study

What motivated a person's decision to return a wallet? When interviewed, people often cited:

- Their parents teaching them to "do the right thing."
- Their religious beliefs.
- Empathy for the wallet's owner.

The Rescuer Study

Samuel and Pearl Oliner's *The Altruistic Personality* interviewed 406 persons who rescued Jews from the Nazi Holocaust and 126 people who did *not* get involved.



What motivated the decision to rescue? Rescuers cited:

- The norms of their group—church, country, etc. (52% of rescuers)
- Empathy for the victims (37%).
- Universal ethical principles (11%)

The Power of Culture

"The basic morality in this little country is to be nice to your neighbor and to treat people well. I helped Jews because I didn't want to see my fellow countrymen hurt."

—A Danish man



The Power of Moral Principle

Suzanne, a high school mathematics teacher:

"All men are born free and equal by right."

The Power of Parents

Compared to non-rescuers, rescuers were much more likely to say that their parents modeled and taught good values.

One woman remembered: "My mother always said to do some good for someone at least once a day."

The Power of Parents

- **Non-rescuers** more often described their parents as using physical punishment to discipline.
- **Rescuers** remembered their parents as only occasionally punishing and more often "explaining things."



Lesson for parents:

Discipline
wisely.

The Power of Parents

Rescuers' parents were much more likely to explicitly teach a positive attitude toward different cultures and religions and the obligation to help others generously.

One man said: "My father taught us to love God and neighbor, regardless of race or religion."



Lesson for parents:

Teach appreciation
of cultural
diversity.

Conscience in Young Children

Zahn-Waxler and Yarrow studied very young children, 18 months to 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ years old.


How would they respond to a crying child who got hurt on the playground?

- Some toddlers simply watched.
- Some walked away.
- Some hit the crying child.
- About 1/3 were "altruistic responders." They offered comfort, tried to distract the child, or sought the help of an adult.

What were the mothers like?

The mothers of altruistic toddlers reacted seriously when their own child was guilty of hurting another. They:

- Used clear teaching, pointing out the consequences of their child's actions.
- Conveyed strong emotional concern.



For example, when her 2-year-old daughter pulled another girl's hair, one mother said:

*"You hurt Amy.
Pulling hair hurts!
Never pull hair."*



Lesson for parents:

Take our children's transgressions seriously.

Make use of the teachable moment.

Honesty: An Endangered Virtue

- Two-thirds to three-quarters of high schools students say they have cheated on a test or major assignment in the past year.
- Nearly four in ten teens say they have stolen something from a store in the past year.

Use Direct Teaching to Guide Decisions about Honesty: Why is cheating wrong?

1. Cheating will ultimately lower your self-respect, because you can never be proud of anything you got by cheating.
2. Cheating is a lie, because it deceives others.
3. Cheating violates trust and undermines relationships.
4. Cheating is unfair to all those who aren't cheating.
5. If you cheat now, you'll find it easier to cheat in other situations later in life—perhaps even in your closest relationships.

S.T.A.R.

When you have to make a decision:

- STOP
- THINK (What are my choices?)
- ACT
- REVIEW (Did I make the best choice?)





A parent's success with S.T.A.R.

Two brothers were fighting over
the last ice cream sandwich.

The older brother said, "Wait, let's
STOP and THINK about this."

They talked it through and decided
to cut the sandwich in half.



Lesson for parents:

Encourage kids to use their decision-making skills to solve conflicts in family life.

TROUBLE CARD

How to Avoid Trouble & Make a Good Decision:


1. Is this something that would be considered wrong by my parents, teachers, or religion?
2. Does it go against my conscience?
3. Will it have bad consequences, now or in the future?
4. Will I feel sorry after doing it?
5. Will it cause me to lose self-respect?

—a 5th-grade teacher



The Golden Rule Test:

"How would you feel if
someone did this
to you?"



Sam's father overheard his 13-year-old son talking with his best friend on the phone about a schoolmate who had a reputation for being sexually available.

How could the father use questioning to get Sam to apply the **Golden Rule Test** to this conversation?

Ask-Don't-Tell

Use questions to get kids to practice thinking.

- What's the rule about playing ball inside?
- What am I thinking?
- Why am I upset with you?
- How can you solve this problem?
- What will happen if you keep arguing about the TV?
- W.I.T.S.? (What is the situation?)
- How can you make this a good morning (day) instead of a grumpy one?

5 STEPS IN MAKING A DIFFICULT DECISION

1. What are the facts?
2. What are the important values?
3. What are my choices?
4. What are the likely consequences of each choice?
5. What is the best choice—the one that takes into account the important values, maximizes good consequences, and minimizes bad ones?



MARK'S DILEMMA: As a new 6th-grader, Mark had been friendless. Finally, he made two friends: Bill and Joe.

On the way home from school one day, Bill grabbed a package from an apartment mailbox and said, "Let's go!" Later, when they opened the package in Mark's bedroom, they found two gold-plated medallions.

Bill and Joe each took a medallion and went home. Mark felt guilty. He knew stealing was wrong, but he didn't want to lose his only friends at school. That night at dinner, he told his parents what had happened. **What should the family do?**

Guiding sexual decision-making:

We need to give young people a rational way of thinking about sex—one that appeals to their intelligence and that will ground them and make their decisions solid.

The importance of spiritual beliefs

Teens who take their faith seriously show:

- Lower levels of theft, vandalism, violence, and drug and alcohol use.
- Less likelihood of sexual activity.


-2002 Child Trends Research Brief: *Religious Involvement and Children's Well-Being*

www.childtrends.org



Guiding sexual decision-making:

We need to give young people a rational way of thinking about sex—one that appeals to their intelligence and that will ground them and make their decisions solid.




Sex is most meaningful, most fulfilling, when it's part of something bigger—a continuing, loving relationship between two human beings. When you're married, your sexual intimacy expresses your total commitment to each other.


You join your bodies when you join your lives. The ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment.

10 Emotional Dangers of Premature Sex

- Worry about pregnancy and STDs.
- Regret.
- Guilt.
- Loss of self-respect.
- Corruption of character.
- Difficulty trusting.
- Depression and suicide.
- Damaged or ruined relationships.
- Stunted personal development.
- Negative effects on marriage.

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- **I lost my virginity when I was 15. My boyfriend and I thought we loved each other. But once we began having sex, it completely destroyed any love we had. I felt he was no longer interested in spending time with me—he was interested in spending time with my body.**

—Amanda, a college student



***The attempted suicide rate for 12- to-
16-year-old girls who have had
sexual intercourse is six times
higher than for peers
who are virgins.***

**D. Orr, M. Beiter, & G. Ingersoll, “Premature sexual
activity as an indicator of psychosocial risk,”
Pediatrics, 87, 141-147.**

How Far Is Too Far?

You're going too far when:

- Either a guy's or a girl's hands start roaming.
- Either of you starts to remove clothing.
- You are doing something you wouldn't do around someone you really respect.
- You are arousing feelings that reduce your ability to make and carry out a good decision.

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- **Research has found that living together before marriage is associated with a greater risk of divorce.**

One study found that “the elevated risk of divorce is particularly great for women who cohabited with both their husband and another man.”

Questions to Ponder:

- What kind of life do I want for a child that I might bring into the world?
- How do I wish to affect the life of a person I am involved with? Do I want to have it on my conscience that I caused someone to get a sexually transmitted disease, lose the ability to have a baby, or suffer emotional problems?

10 Rewards of Waiting

1. Waiting will make your relationships better because you'll spend more time getting to know each other.
2. **Waiting will increase your self-respect.**
3. Waiting will gain you respect for having the courage of your convictions.
4. **Waiting will teach you to respect other people—you won't tempt or pressure them.**
5. Waiting takes the pressure off you.

10 Rewards of Waiting

6. Waiting means a clear conscience and peace of mind (no regrets).
7. Waiting will help you find the right mate—someone who values you for the person you are.
8. Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage—free of comparisons and based on trust. By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.
9. By practicing the virtues involved in waiting—such as genuine respect for self and others—you're developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner.
10. By becoming a person of character yourself, you'll be able to attract a person of character—the kind of person you'd like to marry and to have as the father or mother of your children.



The Six Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make

(School, Friends, Parents, Dating and
Sex, Addictions, and Self-Worth)

Sean Covey

(Simon & Schuster, 2006)



The Biggest Questions

Who am I?

What do I value?

What do I want to do with my life?

What is happiness?

How can I make a positive difference in the world?

Is this life all there is?

Is there a God who loves me? If so, what does that mean for my life?



Your children are not
your children.


They come through you but
not from you.

And though they are with you,
they do not belong to you.

—Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*

A mother:

Why did I feel I had to fix everything for my daughter? I had a lot of struggles as a kid. But as a mother, there was a big part of me that wanted to protect her from tough times. I now see that as a mistake. Life is not easy. She needs to experience that and figure some things out for herself.




Wise parenting requires profound humility and discernment—knowing when to let go and allow kids to make their own decision.

Cheryl Jones, adolescent counselor:

I see girls who until now have been the perfect kid. Then they turn 15 or 16, and they think, "I don't want to be just what my parents want me to be." But they don't know what *to* be, so they become the opposite of what their parents want.

This is less likely to happen if we have helped them develop their own interests and sense of self.




We should also teach our kids not only to try to make good decisions for themselves—but also to try to be a positive influence on the decisions of others.

I stood silently by and watched two close friends wreck their lives because of the wrong decisions about sex. One got pregnant and had to give up her dreams of college. The other got pregnant, had an abortion, and had a mental breakdown from the guilt.

Might I have made a difference if I had said something? Shouldn't I at least have tried? *I am my brother's keeper.*

—*Mary Louise Kurey, Standing With Courage*




Finally, if we have religious faith, we should teach our children that they will make better decisions if they pray—not only when they have to decide something but at the start of every day.

A mother of four remembers her father:

Dad always closes his letters with, "Work hard and pray a lot." This never sounds phony because it's what he does. He has worked hard all his life. And he prays throughout the day.

My most powerful image of my father is of catching him kneeling at the foot of his bed, late at night, saying his personal prayers.



For articles and research on
fostering character
development in the family
and school, visit our
website:

[www.cortland.edu/
character](http://www.cortland.edu/character)