

Making Good Decisions

After the tragedy of Columbine, a tremendous amount of research was commissioned to examine the culture of students who act without thinking about consequences. One of the unexpected and startling results was the discovery that adolescents, as young as ten years old can be desensitized to violence. This desensitizing may be linked to another statistic found during this research: Adolescents who played violent video games from the age of seven years old may have "killed" 300,000 opponents by the time they were eleven. Many of these games involve life-like combat scenarios, rewarding the player for destroying, in many cases, human opponents they face. With the advancement of technology, the characters and carnage of their deaths become more realistic with every new game.

Simultaneously, economic data, which researched the effects of out-sourcing on the American economy, revealed another significant statistic: Many of the employment opportunities that typically are available to high school students are being out-sourced to foreign countries in order to lower the cost of labor. This is a growing practice of many American corporations in order to maintain profits, while keeping the price of their goods and services competitive. The result of this would be a new generation of adolescents on the streets with little opportunity for earning income, and tremendous competition for the few employment opportunities that would be available. This means that any blemish that could affect your child's future opportunity for employment will be magnified, hindering his or her progress on the road to success. In the future there will be no room for excuses.

This economic data combined with the desensitization to violence and exhibition of anti-social behaviors in adolescents was cause for concern. Many experts from the Department of Justice foresaw a national catastrophe on the horizon. As a result, I was asked to solve two issues: teach a young adolescent who is more

concerned about his or her social environment (loyalty to friends, fitting in and being accepted, etc.) the benefits to thinking outside of his own self-interests and immediate gratification. Second, how to teach a young adolescent to recognize another individual's ability or lack of ability to make a good decision, thus creating an attitude that has an adolescent thinking, as an individual, about the consequences of his decisions before acting or reacting.

As a parent, I, too, was going to try to address the attitude of adolescents, so I could be proactive and prevent poor decision-making in my own offspring. After all, if you know your child has a tendency to respond emotionally before thinking about consequences, you are better prepared to nurture and guide them.

Communicating with, and trying to introduce concrete thinking to an adolescent, is a task that in most cases meets with a great deal of resistance, but through patience, dedication, teaching skills, experience, and repetition this can be accomplished. Although it is not easy to tell a child that it is in his or her best interest to be wary of certain individuals and situations (especially when their friendships and social image hangs in the balance) it is possible and absolutely vital to his or her current and future success.

We all know people who are "thinkers," fascinated by the subject of thinking, and placing a high value on the mentoring, coaching, and thinking skills. But when it comes to parenting, most parents, including the "thinkers," are at a loss when it comes to "preventive maintenance" for their children. Most parents are inevitably reactionary, waiting for an issue to arise before addressing it. At that point, it is usually too late. Damage may already be done.

Coaching sports is easier. At least with coaching, the results are immediate: winning/losing, success/failure. In life, the results are not always immediate or obvious. The results in life are complicated by environment, finances, and many more inside and outside influences

unforeseen. The naivety and social pressures of youth clouds children's thoughts, and blurs their visions.

Take a step back a moment and remember all the situations you were faced with as a youth, adventurous, curious, and conflicted. Remember making decisions about what your friends were doing, be it shoplifting or bullying another child? Maybe you were the bullied child, making decisions based on anxiety and frustration. Remember the hormonally unbalanced thoughts and emotions you dealt with while trying to come to grips with your sexuality? How many decisions were made for instant self gratification? Did you think about what could go wrong, or the severity or the outcome? How many seemingly innocent decisions had complications outside personal stress and anguish? Did they cause a rift of unrest or mistrust in your family?

The common excuse for an adolescent's not thinking through a decision is "growing pains," but with the average age of anti-social behaviors appearing, now, as early as ten, these "growing pains" have much more significance and a higher cause for concern. I believe that "growing pains," at the expense of a family's health, (financial and emotional) can and should be managed. If not effectively dealt with, anti-social behaviors will follow a child throughout his entire life. As a parent, you hold your child's future in your hands.

As adults, many of us have learned through experience to develop calculated decision-making skills and to use critical thinking to avoid most of these problems. Naturally, when we are trying our best to be flawless we concentrate more on the subject of what can go right and what can go wrong. I maintain that this "thinking switch" should always be "on."

Typically, repetition, experience, and failure, help sharpen one's abilities of analysis. It's a matter of knowing whether to trust your environment, personal problem solving abilities, the decision-making

of others, or even the combination of all of external and internal information provided. However, a ten-year-old has yet to incorporate all these factors into their decision making. In the past, considering all the possibilities could most frequently be learned through trial and error, but in the past there was also much more room for error, and lesser consequences. Even when the average age of violence, sexual activity, and anti-social activity was beginning at fifteen, an adolescent had at least some substance from which to draw, and could more readily adapt and learn lessons. Now ten-year-olds are facing the same life choices, but lack the five years of extremely critical social interaction and experiences, that help develop decision-making and learning skills. Younger adolescents are less skilled at revealing their feelings, or understanding the weight of the implications and consequences of their actions. My belief is, in the twenty-first century, prevention is a less painful method than trial and error. This method I call "Motivational Intervention."

Take note, that even though one evolves to make calculated decisions, nothing is foolproof: "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray" (Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse"). There are always unforeseen complications. Preparedness is another reason why an individual's thinking switch should always be "on". I think you will agree that through past failures, mistakes, bad judgments, and past successes, we all learned that if we do not consider every possible roadblock, a positive outcome is less likely.

How valuable is it to you if your adolescent learns the skills to identify whether other adolescents with whom they come in contact are thinking outside their own self interests? By no means am I discounting randomness and spontaneity. Even when the desired outcome is positive, these actions tend to lean more towards unpredictable results. My goal is to cut down the degree of dysfunction within the American family, so I am treating randomness and spontaneity as traits that are best exhibited after critical thinking has been established (unless your chosen profession is being a

comedian). When I can trust a person to make thought-out decisions, I'm more comfortable with his randomness.

The very basis for networking in the future will be an individual's ability to trust another's judgment. That's not to say that calculated decision-making guarantees success. There are too many variables. Calculated decision-making offers a couple of distinct characteristics: Analyzing a situation increases your chances of success and it allows you to stand out from people who do not consider all the options. In essence, developing problem-solving skills is noticeable. Leaders are identified because of their problem-solving skills and their ability to communicate those skills, to bring about a change in others.

The very definition of "mentoring" is teaching someone to analyze better, whether it is at a job or in their lives, teaching them to dissect and analyze an issue. Thinking out strategies to overcome the obstacles and then communicating those strategies, identifies a leader.

In order to achieve my goal, I created a realistic, fun, entertaining, state of the art, and challenging educational tool masquerading it as a game. I organized a culturally and economically diverse focus group of 5000 students from throughout seventeen states. The participants not only helped to develop all of the scenarios, but also contributed to the language and attitudes of the scenarios. The curricula challenges the emotional and psychological issues adolescents face every day, but lack the experience to be able to fully communicate their feelings and reasons for their actions. The issues I address include conflict resolution, racial prejudices, peer pressure, the introduction of drugs, skipping school, bringing a weapon to school, altercations on the bus, and bullying behaviors.

For example, a scenario is presented where one of the situations occurs. At the crucial moment where a decision must be made, the action stops and a pop-up will appear with a series of questions. This first series of questions concentrates on how your

adolescent feels about the situation. After your adolescent makes a decision about how he feels, a second pop-up appears which asks the adolescent what action he would take to address the issue.

Based upon the choices your adolescent made about his feelings, and what actions he chose, the consequences of the scenario plays out. Three things have just happened: you have learned your child's attitude, you've seen how they interact in a social structure, and they've experienced the consequences of the choices they've made. Issues that are normally hidden and hard to bring to the surface are now revealed.

This is a new method of introducing critical thinking to adolescents through a non-threatening, non-confrontational, and interactive medium that lends itself to more open and honest dialogues.

This curriculum is dedicated to helping every adolescent develop critical thinking skills through communication with a parent or facilitator. Even if the program shows that your child exhibits poor decision-making, and an inability to understand the consequences of his actions, you will now have a platform upon which to start strengthening those weaknesses, and preparing them for the future.

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