



## **Developmentally Making the Right Choices**

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Growing up, we are faced with contrasting social, ethical, behavioral, and safety issues that are crucial in structuring how our personalities will be formed. We assign validity to coping and communication skills based on how effectively we get certain needs met. For example, we may learn that it is easier to take a toy away from someone to gain immediate satisfaction, but discover through our actions that we may have hurt another person in the process. Exploration in this type of a situation may teach us that we have damaged a relationship and seek atonement for our misdeed, or without the proper insight, we might ignore the detriment of our actions in favor of the immediate satisfaction that we feel. We will only understand the significance of our deeds when we can weigh the importance of keeping connected to our environment versus fulfilling immediate gratification. If we do not weigh those social dilemmas internally or under the guidance of another person, we run the risk of creating a routine that promotes needs fulfillment and risk taking over substance, and disconnects us from our social environment.

At a younger age, the realization of a need to change or correct an inappropriate behavior may come from feedback from a parent, older sibling, friend, or other guiding figure. An individual may also engage in a critical review and self-realization from observing the effects of one's actions and reconsiders the outcome they have created. Without proper guidance, role modeling, or insight, the growth outcome can be limited. The poor decisions that we make without the temperance of critical internal or external mechanisms when we are young may limit our growth and maturity in the areas of emotional stability, resiliency, coping, and ethical development as we age.

In William Glasser's "Choice Theory," the individual makes decisions based on their needs. The expectation is that the child should be able to learn alternative behaviors to derive greater levels of satisfaction as they develop. The expectation is that we make mistakes and learn from them so that our next similar social crisis is addressed more appropriately. However, as developmental theorist Erik Erikson might point out, the individual may become stuck in a developmental phase and fail to progress if they cannot resolve certain social crises in their development. What of the individual who learns and practices decision-making that focuses on



selfish needs and does not learn to make decisions that keep them connected with their environment?

In 1802, William Wordsworth wrote the poem, "My Heart Leaps Up," where he stated, "the child is father of the man." Externally, the person that does not develop healthy communications and coping skills at a young age fails to progress in these areas and socially stagnates. We might say that the child does not develop into a definition of a man socially and emotionally when insight or the presence of an ethical role model is absent. Conflicts that shape our personality development fall to limits of what the person knows under these circumstances, and the individual stagnates in their ability to develop healthy coping or communication skills.

At an early age, we should be encouraged to reason out our decisions and consider factors associated with our positive and negative actions. The goal should always be to learn from errors and foster the growth and development of the child into a well-formed individual who makes healthy decisions to stay connected with their environment, and does not become stagnant in their social development. Guided social exploration and conscious efforts to stay connected to one's environment through healthy decision-making should be reinforced in youths.

It is not so much the fact that they cannot tell the difference between what is healthy and what is not, but rather if they have the strength to make difficult choices that are outside of what they know or do that are healthy. The more disconnected we are from appropriate interactions with our environment, the closer we get into engaging in risk taking behaviors as we get older, and the harder it is to make the right choices. Sometimes when faced with multiple choices, we will do what is comfortable versus what we know is the right choice. The more we challenge children to make the right decisions to help keep them connected with their environment, the better chance we have of them developing into healthy adults and speaking up when they know something is wrong.

The fear is that we are not giving children time to explore ethical issues that encourage them to get their needs met, and also balance their connection with their environment at an early age. In many cases, we are not encouraging them to form a life picture of the healthy, mature individual we should want them to develop into. This is not to say that all children are adrift in



their social and mental health development, but the ACE Studies suggests a high level of need for further exploration in these areas.

The first Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study was conducted to examine the association between adverse childhood experiences and life well-being in one's later years. The momentum and recognition of the original study that concluded in 1997 has grown internationally with replication in several other countries and continued replication in this country in a five state survey that was conducted in 2009. In reviewing the results of the 2009 survey, it was reported that over half of the sample experienced an adverse childhood experience that continued to affect them as adults. Out of the more than 26,000 individuals participating in the five state survey, more than 13,000 reported to being exposed to and plagued by some level of abuse or family dysfunction that continues to affect them (CDC, 2010). One of the more telling results of the original 1997 study was that it recognized that there is a lack of understanding of how adverse childhood experiences affect social, emotional and cognitive growth at young ages, and how those relationships promote high risk behaviors.

Groups such as "The Time to Play Foundation," has taken time to explore these issues with students. In 2014-15, the foundation distributed a preliminary survey to 727 students in New York to gain insight on what adolescents thought were important in their lives and important to avoid negative outcomes. This survey was presented as questions with a Likert scale to rate the level of importance of what they felt others may need to learn and accept to be successful in their coping strategies. There was a general theme amongst the discussion of students involved in the survey that if they had learned preventative coping skills at a younger age, they might have made different choices later on.

When looking at the "Time to Play, Prevent Your Life Survey" results, the foundation discovered that adolescents in the sample had strong recognition across grades in identifying three specific choices that they felt were most important. For individuals involved in the sample of high school students, grades nine through twelve, the top three responses in the survey were, "be happy as myself, be myself, and learn from mistakes." Other notable responses included in the top ten choices for the survey included, make myself happy in a healthy way, recognize my potential, keep going when you want to give up, develop confidence, know I am valuable, and make positive changes.



Children need to interact and react with their environments to learn, but also need peer support and models to show them examples of other ways of interacting and coping. It is hard to know where to focus our efforts when examining complex issues involving ethical decision-making and building a moral base. As W. Thomas Bourbon has suggested, given multiple perceptions of individuals, it might be impossible to meet everyone's needs. To add to this, it might be equally difficult to understand the child's perception and meaning of their interactions with their environment. The Preinvent Your Life Survey gives insight into the skills that adolescents feel are important to them to master offering us an understanding of those perceptions and what is important to them developmentally.

Creating programs that educate new parents and community workers to find common language that supports the development of critical reasoning and decision-making skills benefits all children. Efforts that promote healthy outcomes are fundamental in understanding ways that we can reduce the quantity and effects of adverse childhood experiences. It is important to keep children connected to the larger social community around them and foster their intuitive learning of reasoning so that their personalities can flourish in healthy ways. This will be important so they can address the stronger social, ethical, and behavioral issues that they will be faced with as adults.

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Dr. John Salvarodos is a member of the Time to Play Foundation's ([www.timetoplay.com](http://www.timetoplay.com)) Business Advisory Board with 30 years experience as a school psychologist, educator, mental health therapist and crisis intervention counselor and a founding member of the Gardner Massachusetts Suicide Prevention Task Force and may be contacted by calling 631-331-2675.