



Real-World Practice Helps Adolescents Learn to Make Reasoned Decisions and Manage Emotions

Learning to make good decisions and manage strong emotions in a positive way are fundamental skills to learn in our adolescent years. Fortunately, we're developmentally primed to tackle these areas of learning during this period.

Throughout adolescence, our cognitive and emotional abilities mature in ways that help us more deeply consider the needs and perspectives of others, think abstractly, and analyze more complex issues compared to when we're younger. These changes prepare us to develop the skills we need to make good decisions and navigate our emotions. And like every skill, we need opportunities to practice in real-world situations and to make and learn from mistakes.

Research on adolescent development highlights the ways youth build the necessary skills to make good decisions and navigate challenging emotions and how adults can help.

→ **Some of the most significant changes to the brain during adolescence affect the networks involved in processing emotions and guiding behavior.**¹ The amygdala—the part of the brain involved in processing and recognizing emotion—is highly sensitive to social cues during adolescence, helping us adapt to the nuances of social contexts in ways that help prepare us for the complexities of the adult world.

This increased sensitivity, combined with the fact that we're having many intense experiences for the first time (like falling in love or going through a breakup), contributes to emotions that can be more intensely expressed compared to adults.^{2,3}

→ **Our heightened sensitivity to emotions associated with peer acceptance or rejection can influence our decision making during adolescence.** On the one hand, we're more likely to make risky decisions

Upfront Insights

- ▶ Adolescence is a time of remarkable opportunity and growth. During these years, changes to the brain networks involved in processing emotions and guiding behavior—combined with the novelty of strong emotions like falling in love—can amplify the intensity of our emotions. This makes our middle and high school years a critical window to learn to navigate emotions.
- ▶ Our ability to think abstractly and understand the perspectives of others increases rapidly throughout adolescence. In fact, given the time and space to weigh options, many adolescents are capable of reasoning as well as adults when making decisions.
- ▶ Learning to understand our emotions supports decision-making skills, and young people who work to build their emotional regulation skills are less likely to engage in unhealthy risk taking.
- ▶ In adolescence, we need real-world opportunities to learn to regulate our emotions and make reasoned decisions, to practice again and again, and to learn from the outcomes.
- ▶ Interventions that help young people become aware of their emotions and adapt their responses to the situation have been shown to support positive development, decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression, and support youth's ability to make good decisions during highly charged situations.
- ▶ Youth engagement programs can provide adolescents with skills and opportunities that align with the unique developmental needs of this stage of life.

Policies and programs that support adolescents to practice making decisions and regulating their emotions in real-world settings lead to healthier, more connected communities.

when we're in situations that are emotionally charged, particularly in the presence of peers, which can sometimes be unhealthy.⁴ On the other hand, our friends can also motivate us to do good and to make prosocial choices—choices intended to benefit others—like sticking up for a friend.⁵

→ **Development during adolescence also increases our capability to navigate emotions, plan for the future to achieve a goal, and solve problems.**

Throughout adolescence, we build the cognitive and emotional abilities to consider the needs and perspectives of others and to assess complex issues. Given the time and space to deliberately weigh different options, many adolescents are capable of reasoning as well as adults when making decisions.

→ **We build our emotional regulation and decision-making skills through real-world opportunities to practice and to learn from the outcomes.**

Experiences such as finding healthy ways to cope with disappointment and making choices about personal aspects of our lives help us learn how to respond during emotional situations and make smart decisions.

→ **Programs and interventions that help us build emotion-regulation skills and reduce impulsive decision making can support us during this dynamic window of growth and learning.** Learning to recognize emotions and adapt emotional responses in a way that is appropriate to the situation can be an important step in promoting healthy decision making.^{6,7}

ENDNOTES

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Program and Policy Insights

As adolescents build their decision-making skills, supportive adults should provide them with opportunities for increasing agency in decisions that impact their lives. This increased agency can occur in the many contexts of adolescents' lives—at home with family, in school, at extracurricular activities, and in the community.

When provided with the relevant information and time to consider the options, young people have the ability to make rational, well-reasoned decisions about their well-being. **Adults who support adolescents faced with particularly consequential decisions, such as social workers, attorneys, and health care providers, should ensure young people have the time and information necessary to weigh their options.**

The natural inclination to evaluate and learn during adolescence makes it an ideal time to engage young people as partners in policy and program development and evaluation. **When done well, youth engagement provides adolescents with skills and opportunities that align with the unique developmental needs of this stage of life.**⁸