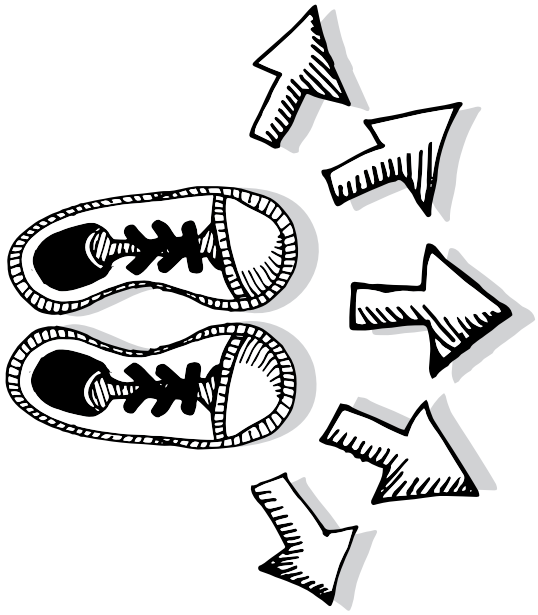
Introduction to the Decision-Maker Moves: The Big Picture



Decisions are doors that provide people of all ages with opportunities to express who they are and to learn about who they want to become. Sometimes the young people in your life may choose the wrong door and, while that can make for a good learning experience, you probably want to help them make good decisions and avoid the bad ones. You did, after all, decide to open up this book. While we cannot program kids with the answers they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives, we *can* support kids in learning and using a common-sense approach to understanding and organizing their feelings and thoughts as they make their own decisions.

The Role of the Decision Mentor

Helping a young person make good choices, on their own or in collaboration with others, requires behaviours that naturally incorporate the decision maker's interests yet leave room for inquiry, scepticism, and creativity. Being an effective ***decision mentor*** means supporting youth in making choices consistent with the decision-making context and *their own interests,* circumstances, capabilities, and talents. The implication for adults is that it's helpful to get your own decision-maker moves in order. After all, the best way for a decision mentor to show kids how to make better decisions is to make conscious, well-considered choices yourself.

> You can help the kids in your life expand their options and make choices in line with who they are and what they want – choices that will inform and enrich their lives.

What Does a Decision Mentor Do?

- listens to and is curious about a young person's perspectives and ideas
- helps them recognize there is a choice to make and sort out what's in the picture
- supports the teenager's learning and trusts they will use their voice wisely
- helps a younger person to set realistic goals and expectations
- gives them space and a safe base from which to positively impact their world
- understands that emotions play an important role in thinking, and that both intuition and reflection contribute to making good choices
- models the personal and group dialogue habits that lead to good choices.

The role of the decision mentor is crucial: everyone needs support and encouragement when learning to refine and run with a new skill. Brooke recalls, with the benefit of hindsight, a problem she noticed as a twelve-year-old. While walking home from school, huffing and puffing up a big hill, a car drove past her, sputtering out noxious fumes that she sucked deep into her lungs. Earlier that day her teacher had told the class about the hole in the ozone layer. The fuming car, paired with the lesson, inspired her to start a club. However, the club never went further than the inaugural meeting where she and her friends decided on who would hold each role, from president to treasurer – a model imitated from one of her favourite novels at the time (*The Babysitters Club* series). Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, another twelve-year-old felt inspired about a problem he had just learned about: child labour. Craig Kielburger and his brother went on to create their own club, which evolved into a global organization that has prospered over several decades (and which has since fallen into disrepute due to some questionable choices the founder and his brother made as adults). Now, Brooke isn't saying she could have done the same as that other twelve-year-old – *but* if a decision mentor had helped her frame the ozone problem into a decision opportunity she could do something about, perhaps she could have gone further than one meeting of the (she thinks) cleverly named Oh-zone Club.

How do adults – the pool of decision mentors – typically address decisions? A common approach to making decisions is to make a list of the pros and cons. American statesman Benjamin Franklin wrote about this strategy (in a letter to his friend Joseph Priestley) some 250 years ago:

> … when uncertainty perplexes us [people should] divide half a sheet of paper by a line into two columns, writing over the one Pro and over the other Con … When I have thus got them all together in one View, I endeavour to estimate their respective Weights; and where I find two, one on each side, that seem equal, I strike them both out … I find at length where the Balance lies and I come to a Determination accordingly … When each is thus considered … and the whole lies before me, I think I can judge better and am less likely to take a rash step … (Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Priestley, September 19, 1772; Franklin 1772/1975, pp. 299–300)

This approach is widely endorsed, partly because the famous Mr. Franklin suggested it and partly because the suggestion to balance gains and losses by thinking through their pros and cons shows great psychological insight. But it can also create problems. As you will see, counting pros and cons ignores many of the most powerful aspects of making good decisions and can lead decision makers astray.

With respect and apologies to Ben, the approach to making decisions we outline in this book goes well beyond simply making a pros and cons list. It is built on, and borrows freely from, well-established practices and writing in psychology, economics, and the decision sciences developed over the past four to five decades. Working together and with others, we've previously described the six Decision-Maker Moves in talks and papers, in books (*Structured Decision Making*, 2012) and as part of a classroom guide for teachers (*The Decision Playbook*, 2019). We also draw on our experiences as parents, our careers in the classroom, and many hours and days spent helping groups of people learn the methods, and in some cases the courage, needed to address tough choices.

Above all, the Decision-Maker Moves reflect a large dose of common sense and a firm belief that making good decisions is a skill, one that can be learned – both essential elements on the road to making better choices. This book focuses on providing techniques and a sequenced approach that will raise the level of decision skills. As with any other skill, success requires practice. This is where your role as decision mentor – a parent or teacher, counsellor or coach, social worker or health practitioner, older family member – is critical, an observation supported by extensive research from psychologists and educators (e.g., Siegel & Bryson, 2012; Carter, 2020). Kids learn best when they have access to a mentor who models the activities and behaviours that underlie good decision making and provides timely insights and suggestions that help a young decision maker improve their skills by paying attention to how they make choices.

Three Spoiler Alerts

1. Decision making is way more than critical thinking. The strengths of a skilled decision maker include compassion, inquiry, scepticism, and open-mindedness to engage in dialogue with people whose perspectives are different. Good decision-making also has as much to do with paying attention to feelings and intuitions as it does with reflective thinking. And it has to do with communication skills, whether the decision maker is acting as an individual or as part of a group.
2. Even if you master all the skills in this book, you'll at times be disappointed by how some of your decisions turn out. There are lots of reasons, including luck and uncertainty, which imply there will also always be surprises – some of which arise because, thankfully, different people hold different values and interpret the world in different ways.
3. Our daily life is full – too full, perhaps – of books and blogs and podcasts which assure you that, if you just follow these simple steps, life will be better. We don't promise you or the youth in your life any such magic – no crystal balls, magicians' wands, or silver bullets. However, the simplicity of the Decision-Maker Moves can help you organize and make sense of the unceasing flow of choices that life

brings. And for youth it can provide a simple and sometimes elegant way to change the anxiety of facing decision *problems* into the joy and richness of exploring decision *opportunities*.

Choices and Decisions

In this book, we use the words *choice* and *decision* interchangeably. However, to a decision scientist:

- ***Choice*** refers to selecting from among alternatives – for example, whether A or B or C is preferred and, often, to what extent or why.
- ***Decision*** refers to the larger process of thinking about what is at stake, who is involved, the consequences of different actions, and – eventually – creating the options and asking which is preferred.

How is our approach different from all the others? We recognize that choices will and should vary from person to person and from context to context. Some people rely more on their intuitive side and typically make decisions quickly; others are more reflective and take more time. Options and resources available to some people are unavailable to others. Yet every person has choices to make and their life will in part be shaped by those choices. Making decisions with the Decision-Maker Moves helps a young decision maker reveal or develop their unique personality, talents, and ideas. This is what agency is all about: a young person living their own path with intention and awareness.

The Power to Choose

Kids live in a world of imposed rules: formal and informal, explicit and implied. It may seem like they don't have many real choices, but that's not true. In ways small and large, kids have personal and collective choices about what to do, how to do it, and who to do it with. Cumulatively, the choices they make shape their lives.

Learning to make intentional, conscious choices is an active process of self-questioning. Having access to a decision mentor and to strategies for making good decisions increases the sense of control and ownership kids have over their own lives. The role of the mentor is to help guide young people to be conscious and intentional about how they use their own power – with the understanding that their power is based on, and strongly reflects, the choices they make. In a speech to high-school graduates, writer Julian Aguon said "the only way to successfully make the journey (from adolescence to adulthood) is to learn how to 'get quiet' – that is, to quiet down the noise of other people's opinions and to take instruction instead from one's own heart" (2022, p. 50).

Consider the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the world early in 2020. Everyone was swept into a new decision context, where choices about physical distancing, shared activities, and the future were suddenly and starkly different. No one was sure of the answers. No one really knew what they were battling or which of many proposed strategies would be most effective. Many people were scared, because the virus was new and sometimes deadly. Here is how one father reflects on that time and the decisions his son made.

> *"Terrell just about broke me in those early days," recalls Russell. "It was easy at first – when leaving home didn't even seem like an option and we were all terrified of what the news would be saying. But when things started to lighten up, that's when it all kinda blew up on us."*
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> *Terrell, it seemed, had had enough of being stuck at home. Almost every night for many months, Terrell snuck out of the house to meet up*

with his friends. He didn't see this choice as particularly risky, but when Russell found out what was going on, he didn't know what to say.

"I was like, c'mon man! How are we supposed to see our family – his grandma and my sister and her new baby – if he's out there riskin' our bubble?!"

Terrell just couldn't see how his decisions were impacting others, potentially his extended family or the entire neighbourhood. One night, Russell interrupted his son at the door. The conversation didn't go well and ended with Terrell slamming the door behind him in total defiance of Russell's rules.

This book will provide lots of ideas for how both Russell and Terrell could have looked at this decision in other ways. Perhaps, had they shared the common language of the Decision-Maker Moves and been practising it often, this outcome could have been avoided entirely.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented elected officials and public health officers with many of the same challenges as those faced by Terrell and Russell. They needed to decide what considerations were most important (avoiding deaths, not overloading hospital facilities, etc.). They needed to know how to hold a dialogue with citizens that would encourage wise decision making, based on everyone listening and learning and adjusting their actions as better information became available. They needed to make many decisions quickly, without access to all the available information. And they needed to know how to identify and address concerns most important to citizens, which often varied across age groups, cultures, and geographic locations.

Rules versus Tools

Adults often offer rules rather than tools or strategies for decision making. In the 1980s, First Lady of the United States Nancy Reagan made a big splash in the media with her slogan "Just Say No" to drugs. The Just Say No

campaign was a call to Not Think. It prescribed an outcome but offered no guide for how to make a good choice when faced with the opportunity to try drugs, no distinction between different types of drugs (Beer versus heroin? Offered by a doctor or by a friend?) and no attention to circumstances or social context. The approach took all the power away from a young person and said, "Just obey my simple rule." It didn't work: according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, average rates of drug use in the US stayed much the same from the 1980s to the mid-2000s, with more people shifting to opioids and other, potentially deadly pain relievers.

Understanding and paying attention to the many dimensions of an important decision is a fundamental component of making good choices. But it's a hard task, at any age, because it involves keeping in mind the different elements that contribute to why the choice matters and then sorting through them to distinguish what's most important and what actions might be taken. And at a neurological level such multisided choices can be especially difficult for youth because their frontal cortex – where the brain makes sense of the diverse consequences of a pending decision – is still developing.

Consider this mother's response to a difficult choice faced by her daughter.

Fifteen-year-old Sam approached her mom in distress. A friend had just disclosed to Sam that she was obsessed with thoughts of killing herself. Instead of telling Sam what she thought was needed or suggesting that the next steps were beyond her daughter's capabilities, Paige made the choice to keep talking with Sam. Paige knew it was important to combine Sam's powerful emotions about her friend's state of mind with some careful and deliberate thinking. Clearly, time was of the essence, so they moved quickly through a series of Decision-Maker Moves.

– *First Paige helped Sam frame the problem by asking, "Who should we tell?" Had she framed it another way – "What should we do?"– the next steps*

would have been quite different. However, Paige knew that they had to inform someone of the situation and quickly. Her question focused Sam on careful thinking in a particular direction.

- *Then Paige asked, "What's the most important thing here?" She held space for Sam to process her feelings and thoughts, moving Sam out of fear and panic and into a more thoughtful, reflective thinking space. By listening, Paige helped Sam tease out the most important values that she held in this situation – which turned out to be safety and trust. Sam was scared her friend would be angry with her for telling someone the secret. And Paige and Sam both realized that everyone would need to live with and (hopefully) feel okay about their actions over the long term.*
- *Sam and Paige then came up with options: tell the school counsellor, talk with the girl's parents, or talk with her mom. They talked through what was most likely to happen if these options were selected, what would go well, and what might go awry.*
- *Both agreed the best choice was to talk with the girl's mom, and that the meeting should be in person and right away. Sam recognized why safety was more important than keeping the secret and she felt a little more confident about how things were unfolding.*
- *The next step was clear: take action, call the mother to set up a time to talk, and get together immediately.*

The Decision-Maker Moves enabled Paige and Sam to wade through complex emotions while thinking their way carefully towards action. All the while, Paige was able to preserve – and perhaps deepen – her relationship with her daughter. Had she responded by imposing an answer, Sam wouldn't have felt any agency or ownership over the solution – an outcome that could have damaged their relationship and given Sam pause before confiding in her mom the next time she needed support.

Paige's guidance gave Sam the opportunity to connect her emotions (what feels right) with her logic (what makes sense). Thinking