

## Sorting It Out

Written for parents, teachers, and others who live or work with teenagers, this science-based guide describes how you can become a confident “decision mentor.” Learn to support young people in making good decisions for themselves. Treating decision making as an essential and learnable skill, the six-step “Decision-Maker Moves” highlight the power and promise of young people as they shape their lives through the options they choose. Stories, examples, and practical tips show how decisions can transform problems into opportunities. Each chapter provides common-sense advice on when and how to talk with teenagers as they weigh up the often-conflicting values, emotions, and trade-offs affecting their choices. We cannot provide young minds with all the answers, but we can help them as they navigate both life-changing and everyday decisions.

Robin Gregory is a parent and grandparent, Adjunct Professor at the University of British Columbia, and Senior Research Scientist at Decision Research, Oregon. He helps families, communities, and governments worldwide address difficult decisions involving diverse perspectives, uncertainty, and tough trade-offs in ways that reflect and help achieve their values.

Brooke Moore is a parent, Adjunct Professor at the University of British Columbia, and a District Principal in the Delta School District, British Columbia. Throughout these roles, both professional and personal, she is motivated by a vision where all young people can move into adulthood with dignity, purpose, and options, a phrase she learned through her work with the Network of Inquiry and Indigenous Education.

# Sorting It Out

Supporting Teenage Decision Making

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*A book for people who live or work with kids*

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# Territory Acknowledgment

We live and teach on the unceded territories of Indigenous Peoples who have been stewards of this land for millennia, Robin on the lands of the Shíshálh Nation, Brooke on the lands of the Musqueam and the Tsawwassen First Nation. We acknowledge our deepening awareness that Indigenous Peoples' ways of being and knowing often emphasize many qualities also found in the thinking characterized by the Decision-Maker Moves – listening carefully, encouraging dialogue, embracing multiple values, taking a long-run perspective, and constructing resilient options. We offer our respect to First Peoples who have long-standing languages and practices for making sense of the world and coming to decisions within and as community.

If you are curious about the land on which you live, work, and play, consider learning more; <https://native-land.ca> can be a helpful place to start.

## About This Book

*While working on this book, Brooke stopped in at her good friend Ellen's house for coffee. Ellen's fifteen-year-old was just heading out the door as Brooke took off her jacket.*

*"Be smart out there!" Ellen yelled after her daughter.*

*Normally, Brooke would have made a wry comment about what Ellen was like at that age, but she had this book on her mind so instead she asked Ellen what she meant by smart.*

*"Oh you know, it's just so scary out there. Who knows what she'll get into. I don't want her to make a bad choice that will ruin her life."*

*As a former high school teacher and now a parent, Brooke knew exactly what type of trouble Ellen meant. And yet, the interaction made her wonder – what did Ellen mean by "be smart" and "don't ... make a bad choice"? Did she mean be smart as in "make the choices I want you to make" or be smart as in "make the choices you can be proud of as you figure out who you are becoming." Obviously, we all want our kids to be safe but we also want them to think for themselves – especially when it really counts and as they grow up and begin making consequential choices all on their own.*

You want kids to make good decisions, but you cannot program them with answers to all the situations they will encounter. Instead, you need them to be able to think things through on their own, in a reliable and intelligent way. You want to send them into the world confident enough to ask the right questions and anticipate consequences they are likely to encounter. Even – or especially – when their final choices are not the same as yours.

### About This Book

Decisions provide opportunities. Younger children are offered choices that start with small things, like what shirt they want to wear or what book they want to read. As they grow up these choices shift to what style of clothes to wear and who to hang with as friends, moving on to decisions dealing with political views, sharing of on-line information, how they express their gender and sexuality, drugs and alcohol, employment and job training. As older teenagers they will be out in the world, often acting independently from the adults in their lives, making decisions that cumulatively shape *their* lives.

Our focus is on ways that you – an important adult in the life of one or more teenagers – can support youth aged ten to twenty (or thereabouts) as they face the nonstop flow of decisions in their lives. With a little decision science tucked in your back pocket, your support and encouragement can be part of a conversation that helps ensure the youth you care about are ready to face the many choices that lie ahead of them. In some cases, a few minutes of focused attention from a trusted adult can make a real difference in the way a kid looks at a decision, perhaps changing what seemed like an insurmountable problem to a decision opportunity with several possible solutions. Maybe you also want to become a more confident decision maker yourself – that’s a big plus from our standpoint, because so few of us adults received training in making good decisions. (Can you remember taking a course on making good decisions at your middle or high school? No, we can’t either.)

These pages will introduce you to six *Decision-Maker Moves*. Each move highlights practical skills for making better choices. Decision makers of any age can develop and apply these skills to the small decisions they make each day and the larger decisions that come once a month, once a year, or once in a lifetime.

The decision-making approach we describe is grounded in decades of science generated from all around the world (you didn’t know that decision making is a science? Don’t worry! Neither did



### About This Book

Brooke, before she met Robin). The six Decision-Maker Moves have been tested in a wide range of settings from dinner tables to classrooms, boardrooms, and beyond. The approach requires (and helps to develop) self-knowledge – knowing what matters to you – and awareness of what matters to others. As teachers for many years, both in K-12 and in universities, we consider these to be essential skills for a diverse and fast-changing world – one that for many young people too often feels confusing and overwhelming.

Simply put, our goal is for youth to partner with the adult mentors in their life – parents, teachers, coaches, grandparents, family friends, aunts and uncles – and change their go-to behaviours, not simply memorize (and rarely apply) yet another protocol. Why? Because when a youth is standing outside school after classes end for the day or hanging out at the park or mall, whether they function as a good decision maker will depend on their quick response, their second-nature behaviours and reactions – the thoughts and feelings they have learned to bring to every decision, not just the ones somehow marked as “special.” And who knows: what looks like a routine, minor choice could turn out to be critical, perhaps because of consequences not thought about at the time.

The choices that are clearly complex and significant might require a teenager to work carefully through all six of the Decision-Maker Moves. However, even in many immediate decision situations, a youth’s well-practised decision-making skills can create new habits and lead to new understandings that make a big difference. Feedback from students, teachers, parents, and other kids and adults we’ve worked with – in schools and government offices, urban centres and rural Indigenous communities, across a broad spectrum of ages, locations, and cultural backgrounds, and in our own homes – demonstrates the power and flexibility of using an improved decision-making process, one that cuts through confusion and helps sort out what’s important to consider. Day by day, step by step, making better choices can lead to a more desired

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quality of life – one more expressive of the unique personality, talents, and experience of each young decision maker.

In each chapter, you will read about kids who have made choices, both good and bad, and the adults who have supported them in the process. You will learn a few simple and empowering techniques for clarifying what a young person values and for thinking creatively about options – stretching beyond the obvious to explore new possibilities. We changed the names of the people in the stories, with four exceptions: (a) Abhay, whom you'll meet later when we share why he made the decision to start a youth organization, (b) Malala, who won a Nobel Peace Prize, (c) Kim, a school principal, and (d) Joanne Calder, a teacher. But more on them later.

At the end of each chapter, we provide a quick summary of the main ideas in a section titled *For Your Back Pocket* – these summary points highlight the most important bits from each chapter. We hope the youth in your life tuck these key takeaways in their back pocket, so to speak, so they will have them ready-to-go when needed. Following these summary points you'll find a checklist of the relevant *Decision Traps* – ways the human brain and heart can prompt us to make poor decisions – and a few bonus ideas that can be used to *Practise* the content of each chapter. Each chapter closes with a brief *Go Deeper* section that lists books, novels, comics, YouTube clips, or movies to turn to if you find the ideas in that chapter deeply interesting and desire to learn more.

Making good choices is a learnable skill – let's learn to do it well.

By the end of this book, our hope is that you and the kids you support will know how to use the Decision-Maker Moves on a wide variety of choices, ranging from the minor decisions made every day to the staggering, once-in-a-lifetime choices that create stress, confusion, and frustration for many of us. We would be ecstatic to hear that the decision-making approaches outlined in this book have helped, in ways small and large, to cut through confusion and

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replace the stress of solving decision *problems* with the excitement of creating decision *opportunities*.

Our goal is to encourage kids and adults to become familiar with an easy-to-grasp and flexible process that will lead to making better choices. By bundling these ideas as Decision-Maker Moves, and by highlighting some of the ways people frequently go off track when making decisions, we hope to make it easy for youth to improve their decision-making skills and recognize the power of their own decision-making opportunities. And we hope to encourage teenagers to recognize they have the power to make a choice and not just go along with old habits or new friends. As the great basketball player Michael Jordan once said (echoing the words of hockey player Wayne Gretsky): “You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don’t take” (quoted in the *Grand Valley Lanthorn*, November 21, 2019).

That’s our bottom line: influence and agency can be derived from the choices youth make. Supporting the young people you care about as they sort out their choices – listening to them, talking with them, sharing stories from your own youth or your workplace – will enhance their lives. What’s our stake in this? We don’t care about whether you see the world in the same way we do. We don’t care about your political views or how you feel about social mobility or whether you think government has too much or too little influence on our lives. However, as educators and parents, we *do* care deeply about supporting and encouraging teenagers as they discover their own voice and use this agency to express themselves more fully in their world now and in the one they are creating.