

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING:

Helping Students Make Choices





“Responsible decision-making really relies on all of the other social emotional learning competencies. We have to really be self-aware and be able to manage our emotions as well as understand how our behaviors impact others. We need to have that social awareness and understand our relationship with others in order to make responsible decisions that are good for ourselves as well as for our whole community.”

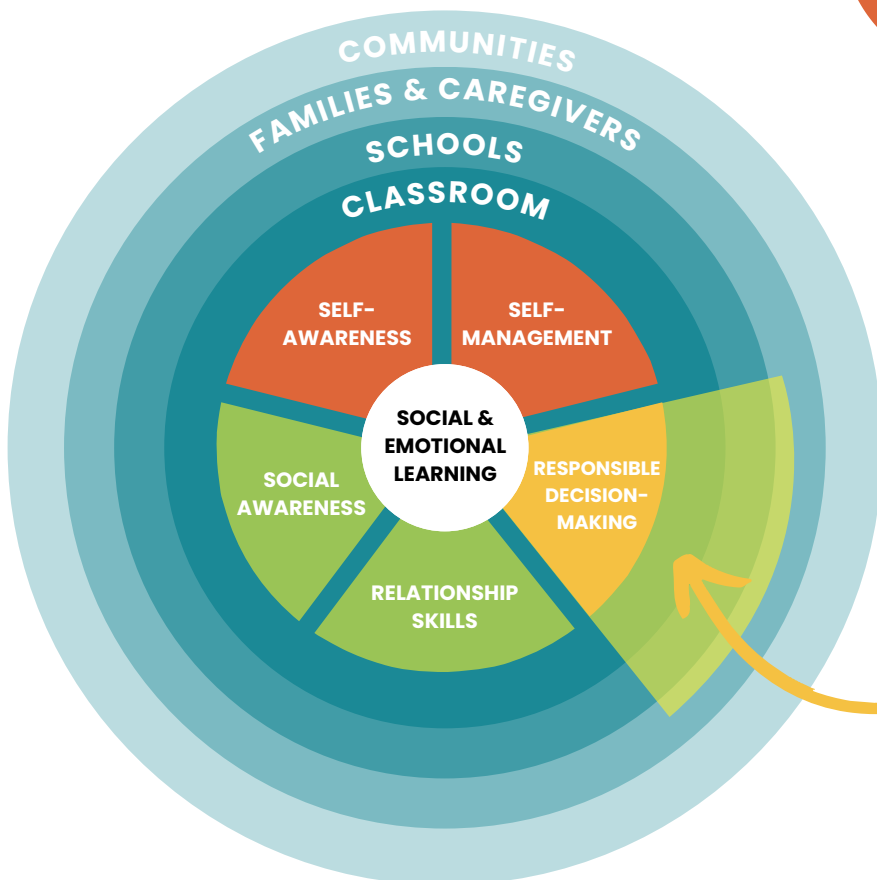
Abby Hanlon, behavior analyst,
Responsible Decision-Making: SEL @ Home

Decisions, Decisions!

We all make tens of thousands of decisions every day. Some are simple choices, such as what to eat for breakfast, which shoes to wear, or what music to listen to on our commute. But other decisions are more complicated and involve moral and ethical dilemmas, as illustrated in the following student scenarios developed by University of California at Berkeley's Greater Good Education Program:

"A student's best friend has been having trouble in math class and asks her if she would be willing to help him on a take-home assignment. Their teacher clearly specified that this assignment was to be done individually."

"A student witnesses some of his classmates teasing a new student who recently arrived from another country - they mock his accent and make fun of how he dresses. The student who sees this feels uncomfortable, but everyone else seems to be laughing along. He worries that if he intervenes, he will become a target himself."



None of us are born knowing how to make the right decision. Social emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom provides an opportunity to develop the higher-order thinking skills that are required to master **responsible decision-making**, i.e., identify an issue, gather relevant information from appropriate sources, and evaluate all options for the best solution and decision.

Responsible Decision-Making

CASEL 5 Competency

CASEL defines the qualities of responsible decision-making as “[t]he abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacity to consider ethical standards and safety concerns, and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being.”

Skills:

- Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness
- Identifying solutions for personal and social problems
- Learning to make a reasoned judgment after analyzing information, data, and facts
- Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one’s actions
- Recognizing how critical-thinking skills are useful both inside and outside school
- Reflecting on one’s role to promote personal, family, and community well-being
- Evaluating personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts

Let’s review the CASEL 5 competency and the New York State Education Department (NYSED) SEL Benchmark related to responsible decision-making.

NYSED SEL Benchmark Goal #3

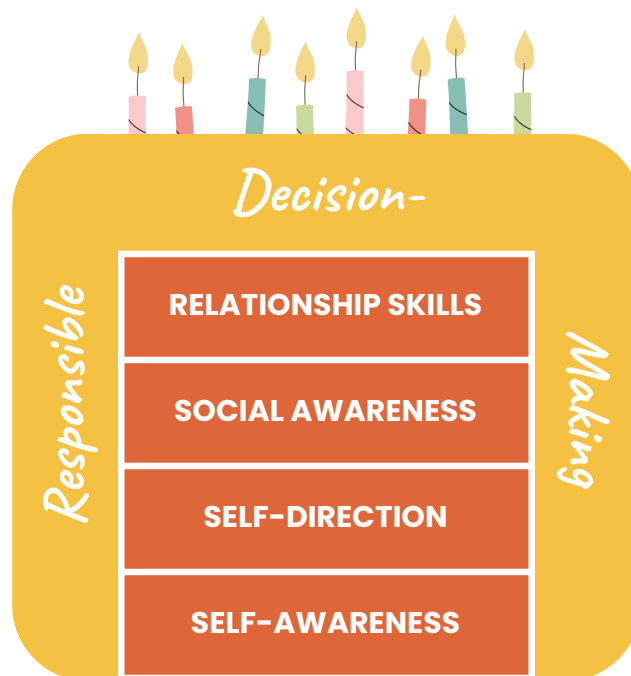
NYSED’s third SEL goal is that “[y]oung people demonstrate intentional decision-making skills and behaviors that consider social, emotional, and physical safety and well-being in personal, school, and community contexts.”

Indicators:

- Considering individual and collective social, emotional, and physical safety and well-being, as well as the social context in making decisions
- Applying decision-making skills to influence outcomes and strengthen agency in social and academic life
- Taking action to support the well-being of their school and community, including taking stands against bias and injustice

The Icing on the Cake

Behavior Coach Amanda McHugh explains responsible decision-making by drawing an analogy to cake icing. She says, "Responsible decision-making is that icing on the cake - it kind of brings it all together." The cake layers are the other four SEL competencies we are teaching our students. The delicious, sweet icing? That's responsible decision-making.



The Cognitive Process

The cognitive process of making a decision involves the following steps:

1. **Define the problem that needs a solution or the decision that needs to be made**
2. **Brainstorm options**
3. **Evaluate each option, weighing the pros and cons of each**
4. **Choose an option and act on it**
5. **Evaluate the results**

However, responsible decision-making is more than this due to the ethical implications. Responsible decision-making pauses at step 3 of the cognitive process to **consider how others will be affected, what social norms exist, and ethical boundaries to be considered, such as commitments, rules or laws, and safety implications.**

Students need to develop moral and ethical reasoning for a multitude of reasons. When students learn to pause to consider the consequences to themselves as well as the social and collective consequences, there is a reduced likelihood of high-risk decision-making.

Changing Brains: Let's consider the specific challenges of responsible decision-making for adolescents. Images of the brain show that adolescents' brains work differently than adults when they make decisions or solve problems. Their actions are guided more by the emotional, reactive amygdala and less by the thoughtful, logical frontal cortex. Based on the stage of their brain development, adolescents are less likely to pause to consider the consequences of their actions and change their behavior. Helping adolescents with this skill requires regular, age-appropriate dialogue about intentional decision-making and opportunities to practice pausing before acting.

Teaching Decision-Making Skills

Students need opportunities to practice responsible decision-making as it applies to everyday authentic and relevant situations. In the classroom, we can support the development and acquisition of responsible decision-making by giving students a chance to practice it in the following ways.

Provide Choices

Offer students multiple options as they engage with content and prompt students to weigh the pros and cons of each and their impact on others. This is one way to give students a low-stakes opportunity to practice the process of decision-making.

Offer a Morning Meeting or Community-Building Circles

Morning meetings and community-building circles (explored in Session 3) can help students establish a dialogue about decision-making as it relates to daily life. For example, this SEL in Digital Life resource suggests grade-appropriate topics on responsible decision-making when online gaming, using social media, and posting online, providing a wealth of content for discussion prompts that are relevant to students' lives.

Model for Students

Model strategies such as gathering all relevant information before drawing a conclusion by stating such things as, "I didn't see what happened. I'll need to hear each side of the story before we can brainstorm some solutions." We can also transparently incorporate student suggestions and perspectives into our decision-making for the classroom and make decisions collectively when appropriate, e.g., "I'm making a change to the homework policy based on the suggestions you shared last week."

Infuse Decision-Making Into Instruction

We can also integrate responsible decision-making into academic instruction. When reading about historical figures or reading a fictional piece, ask students to consider: *Why do they think the character made the decision they did? How do they think the character considered the effect on others? How do they think the character felt before and after the decision? What other options did the character have?* Here are some additional strategies for infusing decision-making into instruction.

Encourage Reflection

Provide time for students to reflect before requiring a response. Encourage the practices of journaling, seeking input from a trusted person, and identifying potential consequences for a decision. CASEL's Personal SEL Reflection tool can help older students pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses in their decision-making process. An adaptation of this tool, which is also useful for adults, is on the following page.

Self-Assessment of Responsible Decision-Making

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING		VERY DIFFICULT	DIFFICULT	EASY	VERY EASY
PROBLEM ANALYSIS	I gather relevant information to explore the root causes of problems I see.				
	I recognize the need to continually grow, examine the status quo, and encourage new thinking in my community.				
	I involve others who are impacted* to explore a problem collaboratively before choosing a solution or launching a new project.				
IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS	I involve others who are impacted* to generate multiple solutions and predict the outcome of each solution to key problems.				
	I find practical and respectful ways to overcome difficulty, even when it comes to making decisions that may not be popular.				
	I consider how my choices will be viewed through the lens of my community.				
REFLECTION ON IMPACT	I take time for self-reflection and group reflection on progress toward goals and the process used.				
	I consider how my personal and professional decisions impact the lives of others.				
	I help to make my personal and professional community a better place.				

*such as staff and colleagues, young people, their families, and other community members - especially those who are historically underrepresented in decision-making

Adapted from: [CASEL Personal SEL Reflection](#)

As a learner yourself, take a moment to consider how easy or difficult each of these action statements is for you.

Teaching Responsible Decision-Making Across Learning Environments

When shifting across learning environments, it's easy to see how giving our students the tools to consider options, make reasoned judgments, and find appropriate solutions becomes even more essential. Students need explicit instruction, time to practice, and a safe space to learn about making constructive choices in both virtual spaces and in-person environments.

Let's consider three key skills required for responsible decision-making and apply a teaching across learning environments (TALÉ) lens to consider teaching strategies that support skill development.

RESPONSIBLE DECISION- MAKING SKILL

SKILL-BUILDING STRATEGIES THAT WORK ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



STOP TO THINK BEFORE YOU ACT (PROBLEM ANALYSIS)

- Place a poster in the classroom or create a digital background for the virtual classroom that encourages self-talk: Is this necessary? Is this kind? Does this help me or others?
- Link classroom norms for academic integrity and etiquette in the learning management system used to organize learning.
- Create learning opportunities that ask students to reflect on their own role in promoting family and community well-being.
- When exploring the problem, encourage students to work collaboratively by collecting peer input through online surveys, conducting Zoom-based and/or discussion board forums, and other online tools that expand the opportunities for community contribution.



IDENTIFY POSSIBLE OPTIONS OR SOLUTIONS

- Encourage students to access online resources that can inform their decision-making, such as websites of organizations that address their topic/issue (check out the [Youth for Human Rights](#) website that has resources specifically for educators and students)
- Offer multiple options for how students can engage with content (a variety of print and media) and how they can demonstrate their learning, encouraging students to share why they made the choice they did.
- Plan a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project that encourages students to create solutions to personal or social problems. (For more on YPAR, see Module 2, Session 5.)
- Offer ethical scenarios or introduce [game-based](#) learning that requires ethical decision-making (e.g., [Quandary](#)).



CONSIDER CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACT ON OTHERS (REFLECTION ON IMPACT)

- Use a virtual or in-person community-building circle for group dialogue about age-appropriate decision-making scenarios.
- Use a pair/share for peer dialogue in person, video-conference breakout rooms, or social media apps. Weigh potential pros and cons related to finding solutions and discuss how each option might impact others. Students can also try out a [decision-making app](#) to help organize (but not automate!) their process.
- Share examples of academic integrity and demonstrating rigor when completing projects and other assignments asynchronously, including the impact on others when academic integrity is broken.

Now It's Your Turn!



In your workbook, you will have a chance to explore scenarios relevant to the age group you teach to help you practice strategies for supporting students with responsible decision-making across learning environments.

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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