

Raising Kids Who Care

Session 4: Decision Making and Prayer

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Gracious God,
may you, your Holy Spirit,
and your son Jesus guide us
in all our discernment and decision-making.

Guide our discussion today
so that we may go forth
renewed in our excitement
to teach our children the tools
to make good decisions.

May we remember to listen to your voice;
help us to drown out other noise
so that we can hear you.

We ask this in the name of the Lord.

Amen.

Childhood Decision Making

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.

- Our parish used to hold an annual Christmas fair, and we would always give our three children \$5 each to spend. Our youngest would head straight to the penny auction, put all her money into “chances,” and place them in the cups in front of the objects she wanted to win. She was convinced that she could get much more for her money this way. Our oldest would walk around the hall quickly, return with two or three things, and reserve a little money for food.
- The afternoon would always end with our middle child becoming frantic as we got ready to leave. She never managed to spend a single dime before the end of the day, when the things she had liked

but couldn't bring herself to buy had all been sold. Every year she would struggle as we grew restless, finally settling on something just to be able to say that she bought it at the fair. From this experience, we learned how hard it can be for some children to make decisions.

- Decision-making is one of the most important life skills developed in childhood. Each day is a series of decisions, from what to wear to how to spend our time. For those who do not develop comfortable and efficient ways to weigh options and make decisions, much time and energy can be wasted and major decisions are sometimes put off until a crisis develops.

- Parental support and example can have a significant influence on how children develop decision-making skills. One trap we can sometimes fall into as parents—with a desire to support and protect our kids—is to make all the household decisions and simply present them as rules for good behavior.
- Even small decisions about things such as what clothing to wear are often made by parents. Larger decisions are often all made by well-meaning authority figures who want the children to behave or be well mannered.
- When children from families where decisions have been made for them are faced with their own decisions, they will sometimes become rebellious, choosing against whatever has been chosen for them in the past. Imagine a child who binges on fast food in high school after only being allowed to eat healthy food their whole lives.
- On the other end of the spectrum, some children are allowed to make decisions that are not appropriate developmentally. One family let their five-year-old choose if he wanted to go to kindergarten in his own language or skip a year to enter first grade in a classroom conducted in a foreign language. He was mature for his age, but five-year-olds shouldn't have the responsibility for such a weighty choice that will have profound effects on his whole family.
- Other children who are allowed to make choices for themselves are not always required to follow through with them. When a decision works out badly, parents may intervene to protect the child from the consequences.
- Thirteen-year-old Paulina told her parents she wanted to play in the competitive volleyball league, even though everyone knew it would be a stretch for her athletically. When she didn't excel, her parents complained to the coach about her lack of playing time (not giving Paulina the responsibility for communicating with the coach herself.) When things still didn't change, the parents let the Paulina quit rather than struggling through the challenge of learning to be a good sportsman and teammate who wasn't the star.
- Most families fall somewhere between a very strict or passive approach. As parents, we are called to be thoughtful and intentional in offering kids opportunities to make decisions appropriate for their age and maturity level.
- Discussing decisions, making lists of pros and cons, exploring the effects a decision will have on others, and telling stories where the principal characters are called on to make important decisions all offer children practice in the art of decision-making.
- The discussion itself also models the importance of talking through decisions with those whose opinions we respect and trust. Insisting that children follow through on decisions and letting them live with the consequences may seem harsh at times, but it is the only way children learn to take responsibility for their lives.
- Pop culture, technology, advertising, and at times, our own need for parental control or a misplaced desire to protect our children, are all factors that can take decisions out of our children's hands.
- We can empower children to be good decision makers by incrementally giving them opportunities to make real choices, especially as they grow. When they are three, they can choose between wearing the red or the blue shirt. At age six they can choose between wearing shorts or pants on a warm day. At age eight they can choose which pants we buy them given several options. At twelve, they can choose to spend their allowance on two pairs of less expensive jeans or one more expensive pair.
- We can be great coaches for our children in this process by helping them slow down and think through what the decision actually is, the possible responses, the motivations for each response, and the consequences—good or bad.
- So often, even as adults, we make decisions based on a desire to impress or the societal norms around us (“Everyone else is letting their child play on the club soccer team” or “If we don't pay for the private lessons now they may not get into a good college”).

- If we can remember that sometimes our faith calls us to counter-cultural actions, we can be freed from always going along with the Joneses. Maybe it's *not* a good choice for our family to give up our weekend free time to drive Johnny to day-long soccer tournaments. Maybe we *aren't* supposed to go into debt paying for this or that opportunity.
- The more we practice listening in to our consciences and the still, small voice of God who is always calling us to more fullness of life, the better we can model for our children how to make thoughtful, intentional decisions. Hopefully, by practicing this discipline ourselves, we help our children develop a sense of freedom to make bold decisions that they know are right and that they can be proud of, even if they might be hard.

Reflection Questions

- ① What is your process for making decisions that affect your whole family? Are you happy with the process, or would you like to see something change? Please share.
- ② Do you think you tend to make too many or too few decisions for your children?
- ③ Share an experience where your child made either a good or a bad decision, and how you responded. Would you respond the same way again, or is there something you would do differently this time?
- ④ Are there areas in which you think you need to take back the responsibility for making decisions from your children? How so? Or are there opportunities for you to allow your children to be more actively involved in decision-making in your family?

Making Time—and Space—to Listen

- In the Gospels, we often hear that Jesus went to pray in a deserted place. He modeled the importance of spending time in silence and prayer, away from all the noise of other voices and influences telling us what to do. He knew that it was vital to get in touch, above all, with the voice of God.
- All important decisions require prayer, and even small decisions benefit greatly from more time in prayer. Some decisions are more spiritually and emotionally life-giving for ourselves and for the world.
- We need to teach our children to sit quietly with their decisions—including the pros and cons and their fears and hopes—and to open their hearts to what that quiet, sacred, inner voice is calling them to do. This is hard to do, however, if we aren't used to doing it ourselves.
- We can help our children learn that the Holy Spirit frequently speaks through our bodies and emotions. Does the thought of a certain decision make us feel tense and edgy, angry, or afraid? Can we feel our necks stiffening or our stomachs getting queasy? Does something fill us with a sense of satisfaction, peace, or excitement? Does it just "feel right"? All of these feelings can be signs that the Spirit is using to communicate to us what is best for us and the world.

- As a child, many of my decisions were made at the top of my favorite tree or lying on the grass, watching the clouds. Today, children frequently lack the time and quiet space for developing the art of decision-making. Discussing important decisions with children needs to be followed up with an invitation to go sit quietly and listen to what God and their own bodies and emotions may have to say on the topic.
- Listening and attentiveness are two very important aspects of prayer and decision-making, but these days it is not always easy to pay attention. Having a place to go where you feel safe and bold can be helpful. If your children do not have a special spot or a prayer practice that works for them, help them find these things!
- Maybe your child would like to lie on his bed to do this alongside beloved stuffed animals, but maybe he wants to find a solitary place outside, such as a treehouse or a private corner of the backyard. Or maybe your child would like to squeeze into the back of a closet where he feels safe being alone with his thoughts and feelings. Learning how to seek quiet outside of themselves often helps children to find quiet inside themselves.

Reflection Questions

- 1 Think back to a particularly important decision in which quiet reflection or prayer was helpful to you. Where did you do it? What prompting led you to make the decision you made?
- 2 Do you have any family practices that encourage solitude, quiet time, or prayer? If so, what are they? If not, do you have any you would like to try or develop?
- 3 Where are some places you can encourage your children to go when they need time and space alone?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Creator God,
open our hearts, ears, minds, and bodies
to receive your love and care.

Help us to find the time and space
to draw near to you.

We desire to listen to your voice,
but we don't always know how.

Grant that we may listen to your word
and act accordingly.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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