

A Compass for Decision Making

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As we were growing up, how many of us heard the adult exhortation, "Make a good choice!" This or some variation to encourage positive choice making is meant to help promote youth reflection and ultimately a wise decision with positive outcomes. Now as adults, we probably find ourselves making similar statements to students on the verge of making a choice. How often do we get a blank look in response? Let us consider an example of a student with a choice.

Michael is a nice kid with above average potential who enjoys athletics more than academics. His parents have recently increased their attention to his grades and have threatened loss of some privileges if Michael's next test scores do not improve. On an errand to the school copy room for his coach, Michael happens to notice copies of his next history test on the copy machine. No one is in the room. He could take one copy and not be noticed.

Clearly Michael is faced with a choice. Does it help him to remember, "Make a good choice!" It may trigger some obligation to honor his parents by practicing trustworthiness; however, he may feel a more immediate pressure to improve his grades and believe that stealing the test would be a good choice to help him study.

How do we teach the skill of making positive choices? Students and adults are confronted with choices everyday. Our values, family training, organizational rules, emotions, and/or self-interest will sometimes guide us. Among the many benefits of character education is the underlying premise that there are universal values that can help guide our choices. The core values are typically identified to include respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring. If you add the principle of the Golden Rule (do unto others...) you have a powerful reasoning device for character-based decision making.

Character-based decision-making is a profoundly simple life skill that can become a compass for choices. It has ethical roots in a Plato and Aristotle and avoids some of the ethical difficulties associated with a focus solely on rules (Kantian ethics), maximization of benefits (Utilitarian ethics) selfish goals (Egoist ethics), or subjective relativism where no one can judge a good decision anyway.

If we apply character-based decision making to Michael's dilemma, Michael would need to Step 1 - Stop and recognize he has a choice and consider his options. Michael could steal the test and study from it or he could leave the test alone and complete his chore for the coach.

Step 2 for Michael is to identify what character he would demonstrate by acting on each choice. If he stole the test, would the potential short-term gain to have the test as a study guide represent a positive demonstration of character? Michael could argue he would be responsible to himself to have the test as a study guide, but this ignores the principle of the Golden Rule in choosing his character goal. If you were the teacher, would you want a student stealing the test? Would Michael be demonstrating responsible or trustworthy character to the teacher who left the exams unsupervised? If Michael rejected the temptation

to steal the test, would he demonstrate trustworthy character and wisdom to avoid being caught with the test?

Step 3 is to act on our choice to demonstrate positive character. This step often requires the supporting character traits of courage or self-control.

Step 4 is a choice to reflect on past decisions and compare outcomes with the consequences that were anticipated at the time of the choice. This step can help reinforce the value of practicing character-based decision-making.

Character-based decision-making thus provides a simple four-step process to help guide students and adults with a compass to make a “good” decision. How can this be taught? Teachers can introduce and practice this life skill in their classrooms. Students need to learn the steps, practice the steps with role modeling, and be reminded with adult encouragement and with visual aids such as room posters or written class procedures. Practice can be accomplished with age-appropriate scenarios found in class stories or literature, current events, or with circumstances students face at school. Character-based decision-making is a great life skill that can help students apply a compass of character to put ethics in action.