



Family Focus on Ethical Decision Making

What is Ethical Decision Making¹?

Ethics is not about doing what you have the power to do, what you have the legal right to do, or what you want to do. It's about the need to act in accordance with a code of values.

Ethics requires that we see the distinctions between right and wrong and commit to do what is right, good, and proper. Sometimes that takes substantial courage, for doing the right thing can cost us friends, money, or fun. But the benefits are clear. Being ethical brings satisfaction and gives a person the sense that his life has order and meaning and purpose. Ultimately, unethical people cheat themselves.

How Do We Make Decisions¹?

Choices aren't made automatically, though they are often made habitually and without due consideration for the consequences to other people. The decision making process is complex. It involves millions of messages whirling inside the brain. We compare our options based on experience and assumption and then we choose a particular action or no action at all.

How Do We Make Ethical Decisions¹?

Doing the right thing, can cost us more than we want to pay. Important decisions take time and thought. Here are three questions that can help us make ethical decisions:

- Golden Rule. Are you treating others as you want to be treated?
- Publicity. How would it look on the front page of the newspaper? What if your mom or the best people you know were watching?
- Universality. Would you want everyone in the world to act in this way?

What Can Families Do to Reinforce This Lesson?

- Demonstrate the importance of thinking carefully about decisions. Inflate a balloon, but don't knot the end. Explain that making a choice without thinking is like a balloon without a knot. Let go and watch it shoot around the room. You can end up anywhere if you don't think before you decide!
- When you or your family are making decisions (at family meetings, etc.)—model ethical decision making, such as using the three questions above.
- Give your children opportunities to make decisions. Choices begin with simple questions for small children, such as "Would you like to wear your red shirt or blue shirt today?" Gradually allow them decisions that are more important and that have greater consequences.

Ethical Decision Making Challenge:

Your child was challenged to think about all the stakeholders that will be affected by his/her decisions, then make the ethical decision. At the next meeting he/she is to report one stakeholder, who usually isn't consider, but is affected by his/her decision.

Ethical Decision Making Quote:

"Ethics isn't for wimps!" Participant at Exercising Character Training, Denver, October, 1996.

¹Peggy Adkins, "Decision Making", *Exercising Character: A workout guide for teenagers who make character count for 9-11 year olds*, 1995, CHARACTER COUNTS sm, CHARACTER COUNTS! is a service mark of the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, a project of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, Marina Del Ray, CA, 1995, p. 1. X-12