

# 6 tips to nurture a confident decision maker

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— Dr. Jane Sosland.



If indecision causes severe distress, meltdowns and disruption to your child's life, consult with your pediatrician or pediatric mental health provider. Additional resources include: ADA.org and *Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries and Phobias* by Tamar E. Chansky.

**A**s a parent, you've probably heard the mantra: To help your child feel a sense of control and better manage meltdowns, offer two choices you can both live with. But what do you do if just those two choices create an agonizing struggle for your child as he painstakingly worries over seemingly simple decisions?

Kristen de la Durantaye, Olathe, says her son Taven, 7, finds decision making extremely difficult, from choosing what to eat for breakfast in the morning to which toy car to pick out at the store. Why? Taven says, "I don't want to make the wrong choice."

"This is painful because it takes so long to decide. I don't make the first thing he wants for breakfast because I know he will change his mind at least twice before landing on his final decision," de la Durantaye says.

Dr. Jane Sosland, a clinical psychologist in behavioral pediatrics at the University of Kansas Hospital, says decision-making occurs in the area of the brain that handles problem-solving. While we're all born with the ability to make decisions, our environment and personality can influence our confidence when weighing options.

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**Weigh the importance.** Help your child learn to differentiate between minor decisions and more important decisions in which the pros and cons should be considered. Kelly Hill, Shawnee, models decision-making to her indecisive daughter Jolie, 4. "If I have a choice to make, talking about it out loud with her and explaining the different options of each may help her make her choices, too."

**Targeted praise.** When your child makes a decision, reaffirm her choice and reinforce desired behavior with specific praise. For example, "I like that red shirt you chose to wear" or "Good call on the restaurant you chose for your birthday dinner. It will be fun to try something new!"

**Practice builds confidence.** Making decisions is essentially taking risks,

especially if you're unsure about the choices. A child who harbors strong self-doubt may begin to avoid making any significant decisions for fear of making the wrong choice. But, the last thing you want is for your child to start giving away his decision-making power to others. Begin with small, easier decisions to help your child feel the sweetness of success. "It's important for kids to feel successful when going out of their comfort zone," Sosland says.

**Avoid criticism.** Naturally, decisions don't always work out in our favor. "Empathize with (your child), but don't criticize," Sosland says. "The key is to keep encouraging him to learn new skills and try new things." If your child decides to play a sport, but then says he doesn't like it, explain that he has to finish out the season since he made the commitment, but that you're proud of him for taking the risk and trying something new.

**Set limits.** Too expansive an array of options can fuel anxiety and indecision. Guidelines can help your child further simplify the decision. For example, before taking your child to the toy aisle to spend her birthday money, discuss what type of toy she would like to purchase. Tell her she'll have 15 minutes to decide and then you'll be moving on to finish your other shopping. Point out items on the aisle she can afford to further narrow down choices. If she doesn't decide within the designated time limit, tell her you'll have to come back later.

**External motivation.** To motivate your child, offer simple incentives to achieve desired goals. Sosland suggests turning privileges that your child may already receive for "free" into incentives. For example, if your child sticks to his initial decision about what to eat for breakfast without argument, helping to keep the family on schedule, he can listen to the music of his choice or play his Nintendo DS on the way to school. Not only will he enjoy the external reward, he'll feel an internal boost of self-confidence as well.

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