

A Tool to Help Students Make Good Decisions

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Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)

Some students need help when it comes to weighing pros and cons, and this simple decision-making matrix will help them sort things out.

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When discussing a popular social and emotional learning (SEL) framework, elementary and middle school teachers I work with frequently tell me they wish their students had a better decision-making process. They often say things like, “They are so impulsive” or “I wish they would have thought that out better.”

Honestly, I’ve had similar thoughts about students and my own children, which caused me to take a deep dive into better understanding some of the science of how decisions are made. Here are some important takeaways about the role of emotions, which will help teachers tackle this critical component of SEL:

- Many decisions are made unconsciously, and our emotions affect our choices and behavior.
- The human brain doesn’t fully develop until around the age of 25. Those older than 25 tend to rely on the prefrontal cortex (considered the rational part of the brain) to make informed and responsible decisions.

- Children, teens, and young adults typically use the amygdala to make decisions. The amygdala is the region of the brain considered part of an “impulsive system” involved in decision-making that triggers emotional responses to immediate outcomes. This means that young people often lead with their emotions when making choices, since the link between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala, which is needed for considering long-term consequences when weighing decisions, is still developing in their brains.

Without having a working knowledge of how to apply their emotional intelligence (EQ) skills, it can be very difficult for some elementary and middle school students to make good, calculated, and responsible decisions. To clarify, it’s not that young people lack appropriate decision-making skills entirely. However, during high-stakes situations, their decisions may be affected by their emotions or a lack of understanding about possible outcomes.

For example, a decision made to elevate their social status might come at the expense of another classmate (e.g., teasing or bullying). Since a focus of SEL is both self and social awareness, we should help students explore the impact of their decisions on themselves and others.

A Responsible Decision-Making Matrix

Teachers can help young learners start thinking about how to frame their decisions by examining their choices, the alternatives, and the natural consequences of whichever path they choose by using a decision matrix. With practice using the tool as a framework, they’ll internalize the process and develop a mindset for good decision-making.

The decision matrix, also known as the Pugh Matrix or Pugh concept selection, was created by Stuart Pugh, a design engineer, as a qualitative method used to rank the multidimensional choices of an option set. In other words, the tool is used to help make tough decisions.

Students can use my adaptation of the tool to make better decisions between up to three choices by weighing options and evaluating the impact (pros and cons) on themselves and others using a simple point system, with positive numbers for pros and negative ones for cons. After tallying their numbers, the decision with the highest score can be deemed the most responsible one.

In their initial practice with the tool, it's more effective when teachers or peers with know-how assist young children in comparing multiple options or criteria that need to be narrowed down to one responsible and good decision. A blank responsible decision-making matrix, or RDMM, with three rows and ample space for listing pros and cons can be downloaded [here](#). There's also a completed example for further clarity. However, as you adapt this tool, feel free to make it your own.

And because we want students to know what to do in the future when confronted with similar difficult decisions, they will need to process their emotions by reflecting and focusing on the consequences of the choices in the decision matrix. Some ways they can reflect purposefully are through independent journaling, [goal setting](#), and [reflective conversations with trusted adults](#).

Incorporating RDMM Into Social and Emotional Learning

Keep it simple and include the RDMM in your [SEL strategies for students](#). You can teach effective use of the tool early in the school year (or as needed) to students using the following steps:

1. Introduce the tool as an analytical framework for helping them make the best possible decisions.
2. Normalize the use of the tool for all students in your class by introducing it as a universal strategy and not a stigma.
3. Let them know that the decision matrix is versatile and can be applied to many different types of decisions—therefore, encourage them to use it both at home and in the classroom.
4. Model its use within various scenarios that they either have encountered or are most likely to encounter (e.g., bullying, conflict de-escalation, and choosing between the fun thing and the right thing). It's important to present authentic scenarios here—even [have students role-play](#).
5. Take time to explain the point system for weighing the pros and cons (positive numbers for pros and negative ones for cons) by paying close attention to the [rules of adding and subtracting positive and negative numbers](#)—especially for younger children. Using a number line can be particularly helpful with early elementary students—also, model tallying in different scenarios and have them practice adding and subtracting with negative numbers.

6. Give students time and space to use the tool and incorporate reflection as part of the decision-making process. Having them list the pros and cons and talk through possible outcomes can be very helpful in this step.

Although at times we may be puzzled by the decisions of our students and cannot make their decisions for them, we can help them by providing them the tools they need for leading with EQ. As young people navigate through childhood and into adulthood, they will face many difficult and important decisions. Those with the least amount of parental/caregiver involvement may need your help the most. SEL combined with a decision-making tool can be a game changer.