

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My wife and I really want to help our five-year-old son learn to make good choices. Any suggestions?

ANSWER: The best way to develop the pre-frontal cortex (the part of the brain that is responsible for understanding cause and effect, as well as long-term consequences) in your son is by **providing choices**, and then **allowing your son to make those choices**. Seems obvious, but many parents rob their children of the opportunity for pre-frontal cortex development by rescuing, lecturing, and making choices for their children.

Research tells us that in most individuals, the pre-frontal cortex is not fully developed until about age 25 (that explains many sad choices in our society). The good news is that research also tells us that development can be facilitated earlier if opportunities to use this part of the brain are provided... especially opportunities that have an affective (emotional) component (the consequences of the choice touch the child at an emotional level).

Consider the following:

1. Give your son many opportunities to use and thereby develop his pre-frontal cortex by giving him LOTS of choices. At five, **most of these choices need not be important to you as parents**. Some examples: "Would you like to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt? Would you like peas or carrots? Would you like to ride piggy-back up the stairs to bed, or race me up the stairs? Would you like lots of vegetables and lots of dessert, or a little vegetables and little dessert?" Inundate him with choices providing opportunities to think and make decisions!

2. **Let your son take responsibility for his choices** so he understands the connection between choices and consequences. Notice, the above choices are not terribly important to you, but they are important to your son because they let him share power with you. As a side benefit, you might find you have less conflict when your son has a greater sense of power

because of the choices he gets to make. Let him celebrate and feel great about his good choices; let him ponder and regret his bad choices.

3. **Don't sabotage the learning by rescuing** him if he makes a choice that isn't the greatest. Choice: "Are you going to take your coat today or not?" Consequences are great teachers, particularly when there is an emotional price to pay. Important lessons are learned when your son has to stay in from recess because it's cold, and he chose not to bring his coat! Notice the emotional component. (You might have to enlist the help of your son's teacher to make certain the consequences are significant. Imagine the lesson learned if his teacher would say something like: "Oh no! Since you didn't bring your coat, you can't go outside.")

4. **Don't sabotage his learning experience by lecturing or reminding** him after he makes a bad choice. Let the consequences teach him. Saying things like — "I hope you learned a good lesson from this" or "See what happened!" or "I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen"— shift the child's focus from learning to anger. You become the "bad guy" and the lesson is lost.

5. Let your son make LOTS of choices, some good some bad, when the consequences are relatively small. Then, by the time he is sixteen, there is a *far better* chance he will think before he decides to drive 90 mph, before he spends his money on foolishness, before he goes too far with his first girlfriend, before he tries some meth... you get the idea.

Just think of the great gift you are giving your son by helping him understand and gain experience in the importance of making wise choices! Consider how many people in our society don't really understand that all choices have consequences. From choosing what to eat, to spending more than they earn, to whom they marry, to how many kids they have, to what college majors are marketable, to what they believe about God, **everyone gets to endure the consequences of their choices.**

Consider how many people these days don't understand or take responsibility for their choices. They think of themselves as victims, wait for the government (or their parents) to rescue them, and transfer the blame to

someone or something else. You are loving your son well by giving him the gift of making choices and reaping the consequences. It's awesome to watch kids make good choices; it's heartbreaking to watch them choose poorly. Again, provide the opportunity for lessons learned well **when the consequences are small**, so wise choices are the rule when consequences are big.

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