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Understanding Choice-Making

Youngsters have the ability to make healthy, positive choices about how to think, feel, and behave when they are given the tools and the context to do so. Teachers have the opportunity and ability to offer both. When teachers encourage the development of their students' emotional intelligence, students will be able to apply that intelligence to the choices they make.

The development of emotional intelligence and conscious and effective choice-making begins with self-awareness. Dealing with self-awareness as a global concept is a rather daunting proposition. Instead, let us start at the beginning and start small.

To make effective choices, people must first understand the definition of choice, the kinds of choices that are made, the process by which choices are made, and the ways that choices affect people. To make a choice, people decide which of two or more possibilities or alternatives is best. People make choices every moment about their every thought, feeling, and action. Often, these choices are made very quickly and below a person's level of conscious awareness. People do not know that a choice has been made or that there was the option to make other choices. Even when aware that a choice existed, a person's range of choices may be limited. Choices frequently are made by default or out of habit; are based on choices of others, such as friends, family, and the media; or are based on faulty information or none at all.

Choices lead to consequences. The accumulation of choices, whether made consciously or unconsciously, and the consequences that follow add up to the person one is. People have the ability to design themselves as they would like to be by consciously choosing among alternatives. They can slow down their decisions and make effective, thoughtful, fact-based choices.

This lesson describes this deliberate choice process and gives students experience with it. Students act as increasingly adept choice makers, or choice detectives, looking for facts to determine the best possible feeling, thought, and behavioral choices. Activity 1 provides a definition of choice and an opportunity for participation in the choice-making process. Activity 2 helps students understand the wide range of daily choices that they make. Activity 3 offers active analysis of the choice-making process. Activity 4 helps students gain awareness of the importance of conscious and effective choice-making and invites their commitment to becoming informed choice makers.

In addition to the actual lessons, there are many ongoing classroom opportunities for developing an awareness of and active participation in the choice-making process. Students learn that each of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors is based on a choice that they have made and for which they are responsible. Therefore, when they are demonstrating a particular thought, feeling, or behavior, students can be reminded that they are making a choice to think, feel, or act in that particular fashion. For example, if a student is feeling angry and breaking pencil points, rather than merely telling him or her to stop that behavior, remind the student that he or she is choosing to behave in that way. Then, help the student apply the choice-making process to examine whether this was an effective choice and explore and rehearse a more effective way to deal with his or her angry feelings. In this way, the student has a structure within which to deal more appropriately with the feeling the next time it occurs (see Figure 1.1).

This is not to say, however, that this structure is easy to apply. Choice-making is based largely on habit, so youngsters need guidance at first and then a great deal of practice. This may seem frustrating and time consuming at the onset of the curriculum. With practice, however, youngsters are able to make increasingly effective choices on their own, soon demanding less and less of the teacher's time. They will not need to be told to stop their ineffective behavior. Rather, they will make effective behavioral choices on their own because they know how to do so.

Figure 1.1 Making Choices

1. Look at alternatives
2. Choose an alternative
3. Act on the choice
4. Evaluate the choice
5. Keep the choice or make a new choice

Students will be participating in a program that can be enjoyable and can help them to become the very best people that they can be. However, let them know that they will be experiencing new activities, some of which they may feel uncomfortable doing. If they find an activity uncomfortable, let them know that they can tell you how they feel and that they will be allowed to pass on the activity the first time it is introduced and rejoin the activity when they feel more comfortable.

Also, it may be harder for students to stay in control because of the difference in structure between some of these activities and the regular classroom activities to which they have become accustomed. For example, in this curriculum, they will be moving around as opposed to sitting in their seats. Let them know that it will be helpful if they can work hard to keep themselves in control and to ask for help when they are finding that difficult to do.

► Activity 1: STANDING UP FOR CHOICES

1. Explain that when making a choice, a person decides what is best out of two or more possibilities, also known as alternatives. Remind students that people are always making choices between alternatives. They make choices about what to believe, how to think, and how to act. Many of these choices are made without planning. It is important to plan their choices so they make the best choices possible.
2. Present two alternatives and ask students to choose one, standing up when the alternative is read to indicate their preference. Examples of choices to present to students:
Do you prefer Burger King's or McDonald's hamburgers?
Do you prefer sports or art?
In your free time, do you study or do you watch television?
If there was someone in class whom no one liked, would you stay away from or go up and talk to that person?
If you had no money and you saw some on your parent's dresser, would you take just a little bit for something you really wanted, or would you leave the money there?
3. Add other choices based on your knowledge of the choices your students make. Provide a range from simple to increasingly difficult choices.
4. Explain that many choices are made without thinking, and discuss this with students. Choices are made this way sometimes because a person follows what a friend does. It is important to think before choosing so that the choice made is the best for both the chooser and other people. It is helpful for students to think of the choice process as pushing the "pause button" on the "VCR of life," to stop and think about whether or not they want to make a choice before it is made. In this way, it is more likely that the choices made will bring the best results both immediately and in the future, as people are a result of the accumulation of all the choices that they make. Choice detectives make the best possible choices by slowing down and looking at available

alternatives, the consequences of choosing those alternatives, and which choice is in line with their values. Doing so offers a much greater chance of being happy, healthy, and successful in the future. Which choices are easy to make, and which are more difficult? Who and what influences the choices that are made?

► Activity 2: BRAINSTORMING DAILY CHOICES

1. Explain that students are going to brainstorm together. Explain that brainstorming means they will search their minds for and share as many possible ideas as they can come up with about a particular topic. There are no right or wrong ideas, and they are not looking for one particular answer. Encourage students to feel free to share any idea that comes into their minds and to withhold comments about or evaluation of the ideas until a later time.
2. Students brainstorm about the daily choices that they make, those their parents make, and those their teacher makes, to get an idea of the great number and variety of choices made by people every day. Examples of choices that might be identified include

Student: what to wear, whether or not to get angry in response to a sibling's action

Parent: what to make for dinner, whether to keep working or take a coffee break

Teacher: whether to reprimand a student's action or let it go, how much time should be spent on a particular subject

► Activity 3: THE CHOICE WALK

1. Ask a volunteer to walk from one side of the room to the other. Ask the rest of the class to watch very closely as the volunteer crosses the room.
2. Following the walk, ask the observers to describe the choices the person made as he or she was crossing the room. How fast did the person walk, where did the person look? Then ask the walker whether he or she thought about other choices that may have been available before taking action, or did the person make the choices quickly without thinking about them? (Most students will reveal that the choices were made without thinking.)
3. Explain that to slow down choice-making and help a person look at other possible choices, a series of choice-making steps can be used. In a way, it will be like using the pause button on the VCR before the choice is made and then making the choice in slow motion. Ask the same student to walk across the room again. This time, have the student focus on one choice—for example, speed when walking—to demonstrate the choice-making process:

First, look at the available possibilities, that is, the alternatives. What alternatives are there in terms of speed of walking? (A person could walk slowly, at a moderate pace, quickly.)

A person then chooses one of the alternatives. (Student chooses.)

Explain that after a choice is made, a person takes action based on that choice. (Student walks across the room at the chosen speed.)

Explain that a person can then evaluate the choice made to see whether he or she is happy with the results. (Student evaluates the choice. For example, he may not have liked that he walked fast because he got tired, or he may have liked that he looked straight ahead because he seemed confident.)

If a person is not happy with the chosen alternative, a person can make a new choice and take a different action. (Student chooses whether to make a new choice.)

4. Summarize the steps of the choice-making process, using Figure 1.1.

Extension

Students analyze the process of making choices for the task of walking across the room. For example, how did the student find the alternatives? How did the student evaluate the alternatives? How did the student decide whether to change the choice?

► Activity 4: BECOMING INFORMED CHOICE MAKERS

1. Explain that the students may use the choice-making process—demonstrated in Activity 3 for the simple choice of how fast to walk—to make the best choices for themselves in every area of their lives. Students can slow down their choice-making and look for clues to determine the best possible choices to make.
2. Ask students to commit themselves to more deliberate choice-making and the use of the choice-making process by taking the Choice-Detective Pledge. Ask each to raise his or her right hand and repeat: “I will make choices deliberately, making sure that I look for clues when choosing how I will think, feel, and act.”
3. Have students design a pledge form and sign it in a collective ceremony.

Extension

Write a diary entry reflecting the daily choices made by a person in a certain period in history or the choices made by a particular historical figure or literary character being studied.

Middle School Modifications

STANDING UP FOR CHOICES—Add examples, such as

If someone offered you a drink at a party, would you take it?

If you had not studied for a test and could see someone’s paper out of the corner of your eye, would you look?

If you were pressured to do something you were uncomfortable doing and if you did not, you would lose a friend, would you do it?

Pass a paper around and ask students to write about times when they stood up for a choice they or someone else made that may have differed from others' choices. Have a student read the list aloud.

BRAINSTORMING DAILY CHOICES—Have the students draw a timeline to include choices they were able to make in the past, the choices they can make now, and the choices they will be able to make in the future. Give examples of past choices (what to eat, what to wear), of present choices (what activities to do, what to do on a date, where to apply to college), and of future choices (whom to marry, where to live, where to work). Have students discuss how the kinds of families people are born into affects their range of choices. Students might write and deliver a speech titled "The Effects of Geographic Location and Economic Status on the Range of Choices Available to Us."

An additional activity might be to have students draw a picture and discuss all the choices made during the activity, for example, choice of medium, color, whether to talk during the activity, and whether to copy someone else's idea.
