

OUR KIDS AND DECISION-MAKING DISCERNMENT

BY: WALT MUELLER, CPYU President



This morning, I logged on to my Google News Feed and checked out the stories that came up with the key words “Teen,” “Teenager,” “Youth,” “Adolescent,” and “Adolescence.” Sadly, the news that pops up is usually less than positive. Today, however, it was even worse than that.

Here’s a sampling of the headlines that caught my eye. . .

- Teen brought gun to Buckeye high school.
- Vigil held for nonbinary Oklahoma teenager who died following a school bathroom fight.
- Teenager arrested for murder in connection to Denton shooting.
- Teenager arrested in chain of threats made to Maui schools.
- Decriminalization of ‘magic mushrooms’ leads to more emergency calls by youth.
- Swipe left or right: New study examines social anxiety in adolescents.
- More adolescent boys have eating disorders.

- The “Sephora Kids” Phenomenon: A Glimpse Into the World of Present Makeup Influencers on TikTok.
- Cannabinoid exposure during adolescence disrupts neural regulation.

There are a couple of thoughts that were prompted by my quick scan of these headlines. . .

First, these are just a few of the stories highlighting the mounting pressures, challenges, choices, problems, temptations, and expectations our kids are facing in today’s world. We can be reasonably sure that the last twenty-four hours alone holds way too many other stories of teenagers engaging in riskiness, foolishness, immorality, and/or criminal behavior.

Second, each of these stories (while admittedly complex in details of causation) are rooted in, began with, and continued with a series of bad decisions. Many of those bad decisions have been made by the adults in their lives. Perhaps more are decisions made

“The good news is that parents always exercise the greatest influence on the spiritual lives of their children.”





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by our kids themselves. I'm sure that if we were privy to back-stories, many kids who make bad decisions were raised in an environment that may have been characterized by bad decisions. Ultimately, both good and bad behaviors are occasioned by a series of good or bad decisions.

These realities got me thinking about a current cultural trend that requires a response. And, they reminded me that those of us who are parents and youth workers are uniquely positioned to train kids in how to make good and Godly decisions, rather than decisions that are foolish, immoral, and at times criminal.

The cultural trend is what I call "too much time spent living life in the moment." This is "Carpe Diem!" and "YOLO" taken to an extreme. While followers of Jesus are called to make the most of every moment, we are also called to live responsible lives of obedience to God's will and God's way. We are not called to live without regard for past lessons or future consequences.

This cultural emphasis on eating, drinking, and being merry... for tomorrow we die, is magnified when you understand where kids are at developmentally. They're already prone to this kind of in-the-moment living because of the impulsive nature of the adolescent experience. Yes, it's that not-so-old frontal lobe again! The part of the brain that's responsible for decision-making and impulse control isn't fully formed until about the age of 25. This creates a situation where when kids face decisions they tend to default to what they do ask vs. what they should ask. It goes like this... "What will this get me now?" vs. "How will this effect me for the rest of my life?" They default to feelings and emotions (being "authentic" to one's self) vs. rationally thinking through the decision and its consequences. They tend to seek out sensations rather than wisdom. And they tend to default to immediate vs. delayed gratification.

Think for a minute about kids and sexting. Asking for and/or sending a nude photo of one's self happens in a pressure-filled moment. Kids cave in the midst of the moment... and then wind up living for a long, long time with regret when photos go viral or law enforcement has to get involved.

I've come to understand that whether we are young or old, the key to making good decisions involves engaging three decision-making principles. These are worthwhile principles to teach to the kids you know and love.

- 1. The Principle of the Past:** Don't make a decision until you think back. Have you ever made a decision like this before? If so, how did it turn out? Do you know people (parents, youth workers, other adults) who have made a decision like this in the past? If so, how did it turn out and what can you learn from that? Does the Bible contain any principles or examples from biblical history that can be employed in the decision-making process? Francis Bacon once said that "Histories make men wise." We must consult and learn from history.
- 2. The Principle of the Pause:** Don't act too quickly. Proverbs 22:3 tells us, "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it." Seek advice and counsel. Ponder whether your decision will put you on the wide road that leads to destruction or the narrow road that leads to life. I often tell my own kids this: "Every time you make a decision, you are choosing sides."
- 3. The Principle of the Prospects:** Recognize that every single decision you make puts you on a road that will bring with it all kinds of twists and turns. What will the consequences of this decision be? Keep in mind these words of Jesus: "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13-14). The right way is often the hard way, but it is the way that in the end leads to flourishing and life!

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