



Dear Educator:

Today, young people entering adolescence face many choices — choices which can affect the rest of their lives, decisions that many are unprepared to make. Unable or unwilling to turn to parents for guidance, teens are increasingly susceptible to the pressures and influences of peers who often are equally uninformed about life's challenges and questions.

Recent research in adolescent behavior and development shows that one of the most important contributions educators can make to young people is to help them develop their capacities as decision makers. According to Dr. Richard P. Keeling, a leading specialist in the field of adolescent health, young people who are most at risk are those most lacking in the capacity to make decisions. He warns that “levels of self-esteem and self-determination — the ability to make choices based on an internal, personal framework of values — among our teenagers are dangerously low.”

This study guide is part of the **RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW** program which is designed to help students develop the capacity to make decisions — the decisions that are right for them. The program is funded by the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, which firmly believes that children should not smoke. Developed for use with students in grades 6-9, the activities in this program help students look at some of the decisions they might face this coming year. They will examine the factors that influence decisions, learn skills that help them make choices and, finally, make some personal decisions for the year ahead.

We encourage you to share this exciting program with your colleagues. Although the materials are copyrighted, you have permission to make as many copies as you need for educational purposes.

Please take a moment to complete and return the enclosed response card.

Your comments help us to create programs that continue to meet your needs. Returning this card also ensures your continued receipt of free educational programs.

Start the year off right for both you and your students by sharing this program with them and watching them grow in confidence as they learn to make the right decisions, right now.



INTRODUCTION

RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW offers suggestions and materials to help students acquire better decision-making skills. The program is based on the following premises:

- All students can develop sound skills as decision makers.
- Schools can help students develop these skills by providing as many guided experiences in decision making as possible.
- As students gain greater mastery of decision making, they will become better able to resist the negative influence of peers.

In order to become better decision makers, students must first come to grips with the outside forces that can lead them to make choices they will later regret. The most obvious force is **peer pressure**. Adolescents worry that they may be taunted or teased into doing something they don't want to do or that they know is wrong. (Ex. "My friends smoke. They are pushing me to start. I don't want to be different, so I think I'll do it.")

Students also need to understand the more subtle force of **peer influence**. Young people who engage in risk behaviors often do so because they assume this is something they have to do in order to be accepted, to be liked or to have and maintain friendships. No overt pressure is applied; instead, the individual creates an internal pressure out of the desire to fit in. (Ex. "The cool kids in school smoke. I want to be cool, too. I think I'll start smoking, so I can be like them.")

RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW is designed to help students become more aware of peer influence and how to prevent it from dictating their decisions. The activities in this kit are designed to take students step-by-step through the decision-making

process. With guidance and practice, they will become more adept at identifying conflict, stating goals, analyzing alternatives by considering consequences and evaluating the influence of peers, parents or other adult family members and the media.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This program has been designed to be used with students in grades 6-9 in guidance programs or classes such as social studies, health or life skills. It is important to reach students in these grades as they are entering adolescence and are beginning to make decisions that can have prolonged effects on their lives. The activities will help students develop strong decision-making skills so they are able to make the right decisions for themselves — regardless of outside pressures and influences.

OBJECTIVES

RIGHT DECISIONS, RIGHT NOW is designed to help students:

- understand the difference between peer pressure and peer influence.
- recognize ways in which both peer pressure and peer influence can affect the decisions they make.
- discuss shared concerns about decisions they may face during the coming year.
- analyze the mental steps involved in making a decision, and apply those steps to important personal decisions.
- consider the consequences or possible alternatives in making any decision.
- recognize that even the best decisions may have some negative outcomes.
- establish specific and important decisions (goals) for the coming year.

- evaluate ways to utilize positive and negative influences that might affect the achievement of personal goals.
- gain confidence in their ability to make the best decisions for their lives now and in the future.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

This program contains the following components:

1. Four activity masters to reproduce as individual worksheets for students.
2. This teacher's guide which contains:
 - A statement of program objectives.
 - Background information.
 - Suggestions for presenting each activity.
 - Ideas for extending each activity.
 - A list of resources.
3. A poster that encourages students to think about the decisions they will need to make this year.
4. A teacher response card that allows you to comment on the program. Return this card to ensure that you remain on our mailing list and receive future free educational programs.

USING THE PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Poster

Display the poster in a prominent place in your classroom. You can use it as an introduction to the program as well as a reminder to students of the questions they should ask themselves when faced with important, tough decisions. Inform students that making the right decision involves skill and practice. As you discuss the poster, help students realize that the steps to making the decision illustrated on it will help them gain skills needed to make future decisions.

The practice will come with applying these questions to the tough decision-making situations they will face all year.

ACTIVITY

A YEAR OF DECISIONS



Introduce the activity by spending a few minutes talking in general terms about situations the students feel they might face in the coming year, especially those that will require them to make difficult decisions. Ask if anyone is concerned about the pressures and temptations that lie ahead. Do they feel uneasy about being pressured into doing something they know is wrong? After some initial hesitation, the students will begin to talk about some of the anxieties and uncertainties they feel.

Let the students know that the activities they will be working on represent an opportunity to think about and discuss some of the issues and questions that concern them most. Make it clear that they are not in a test situation and that you are not looking for right or wrong answers. Use whatever techniques work best for you to help the students feel comfortable and willing to address these matters in an honest and serious way.

As you distribute copies of Activity One, explain that it is designed to start them thinking about the kinds of decisions they might face in the year ahead.

Part I

Instruct students to complete only the first part of the activity, thinking about each situation and answering honestly. They should check the box that identifies how they “feel” rather than what they think should be the answer. This exercise will help them better understand themselves, a first step in learning how to handle difficult decisions.

Peer Pressure/Peer Influence

Before completing Part II of the activity, introduce the concepts of **peer pressure** and **peer influence**. First ask volunteers to give a definition and one or two examples of peer pressure. Teasing, cajoling and challenging are the key factors. Most students are familiar with these methods of pressure. Point out that peer pressure is not always verbal. Excluding someone from a friendship or group, for example, can produce a strong feeling of pressure.

To help the class understand peer influence, ask about their tastes in such areas as music, clothing styles, hair styles, things to do for fun, etc. How did they develop these particular tastes? Point out that these choices are the product of peer pressure. We are all influenced by peers. We talk, dress, act and do things according to the standards of our group of friends.

As you talk about peer influence, share the following information with students:

- Both peer pressure and peer influence can be either positive or negative forces in our lives.
- Conforming to group standards is perfectly healthy and normal — for adults as well as teens. A business executive is not likely to wear shorts and a sweatshirt in an office; this would set the person off as someone strange or different.
- It’s helpful to think of peer influence as pressure we put on ourselves. We want to be accepted, to fit in, to be liked, so we act in ways that will ensure this, sometimes even when it means doing something we feel we shouldn’t.

Once students understand the difference between peer pressure and peer influence, have them look at the situations in Part I again, identifying which

ones involve peer pressure and which show peer influence. Situation 3, stealing the CD; situation 4, going to an unchaperoned party; situation 6, the friend trying pot; and situation 7, friends smoking, represent situations in which there is overt pressure. In the other situations, peer influence is operating. The decision maker is motivated by the desire to be accepted or not to be isolated.

Part II

Before students begin Part II of the activity, encourage them to look at their responses to Part I and decide whether their decisions are more affected by peer pressure or peer influence. When they have completed Part II, encourage them to talk about the situations they described and the kinds of pressures and influences that might be involved. Students are likely to notice that they worry less about peer pressure than they do about losing friends if they don’t go along with what the friends want to do.

Emphasize that the fear of losing friends or not fitting in is a serious matter and one that the class will address in the next activities. At this point, simply learning that others share the same uncertainties may provide an important feeling of relief.

Extending the Activity

1. Divide the class into four or five groups. Have each group brainstorm ways in which peer pressure and peer influence can be positive forces. For example, how can their own actions serve as a positive model for their peers and for younger students both in terms of what they do and what they avoid doing.
2. Apply the concepts of peer pressure and peer influence to larger social issues. How, for example, can these have either a positive or negative impact on the environment of the school or the



community? Identify acceptable ways of behaving in terms of littering, recycling or acting to improve the appearance of one's surroundings. Then plan ways to use positive peer pressure and peer influence to incorporate these behaviors as acceptable ways of acting.

ACTIVITY PLAY IT OUT



Introduce the activity by dividing the class into four or five groups.

Explain to students that they are going to have a chance to observe decision making in action. Pass out copies of the activity sheet and have each group develop its own skit, following the instructions. While it's desirable to have each group work with a different decision topic, it is more important that the students feel the topic is meaningful to them — even if all groups end up with the same topic.

Part I

Be available to answer questions or assist groups that may need help. Allow at least 15 minutes for the groups to meet and plan their scenes. The actual role play for each group should last a maximum of ten minutes. The role play can be entirely ad-lib, with each student playing the assigned part as he or she perceives it. However, some groups may want to develop more elaborate plans with a written dialogue. Either approach will work.

As skits are performed, you might want to act as director to keep the scenes focused and moving. During performances, you'll find that some "actors" may discover that the

chemistry of conflicting opinions and values leads them to say things they hadn't intended, changing their position on an issue. Try to bring out these instances in your follow-up discussion.

Part II

Make additional copies of the activity sheet so that students can fill out a separate response form for each skit. Use these responses as the basis for discussion. It's important to debrief each skit as it is completed. Also, in discussing the response forms, be sure that the student actors receive some positive reinforcement for their efforts.

After all skits have been presented and discussed, use the following questions for wrap up:

1. To what extent do you think the decisions were affected by (a) peer pressure, (b) peer influence?
2. Was there evidence that either peer pressure or peer influence can be positive? For example, did Mark or other friends try to push or persuade Jeremy to make the decision that was best for him?
3. Who had the greatest influence on the decision?
4. If this had been your decision to make, do you think you would be influenced more by your parents, an adult family member, your best friend or other friends and acquaintances? (Answers to this last question may be quite varied. Younger students tend to feel that the influence of parents is strongest, but this feeling changes for older students who are more influenced by friends.)

Extending the Activity

1. Positive peer influence has been a valuable component of several drug abuse prevention programs. You might want to reinforce this factor by having students polish skits that emphasize positive peer pressure and influence and perform them again for a school assembly or for younger students.
2. Encourage students to watch their favorite television sit-com or drama to look for examples of how the pressure or influence of peers can affect important decisions. As students report on these shows, discuss the extent to which such television presentations adequately reflect the realities of life.

ACTIVITY THOSE IMPORTANT DECISIONS



To introduce the activity, you might want to develop a hypothetical situation to keep the discussion of decision making from becoming too abstract. Either invent your own case or use the example of Kim, a 9th grade student, who has to decide whether to study for a difficult test or to go to a movie with friends.



Part I

Using your hypothetical case, go over each of the decision-making steps, emphasizing the following points to students.

1. The actual decision-making process is not as simple as the steps outlined. In thinking about a decision, Kim might jump around from consequences to objectives to goals and then back to consequences. In addition, in real life, the whole process is often shortened by making a sudden decision on impulse or habit. However, when faced with an important decision, it helps to go through each of these steps.
2. Making a decision involves both factual information and values — the things the decision maker considers most important. Kim, for example, has to know the factors as well as the consequences that affect the decision. What is Kim's present grade in the subject? What affect will the test have on the grade? Values are also central to the whole process, such as the kinds of rewards that are most important to Kim. What will provide the greatest immediate satisfaction? Does one activity have more value for future applications, such as college admission?
3. Even when we choose the alternative that seems best, there is likely to be at least one negative consequence. In our example, Kim may select a movie because being with friends is the most important thing. A low grade on the test may be the negative consequence. Use this idea to make the point that gaining decision-making skills also means learning to accept all the consequences of a decision.
4. Pressures and influences from friends can also affect the outcome of a decision. For

instance, the pressure of friends to go to a movie may affect the final decision even though Kim knows the extra study time would make an important difference in the final grade.

Part II

Allow students as much time as they need to complete the decision-making chart. Encourage them to think through every step of the process, using the back of the sheet if they need more space.

Some students may be reluctant to share with the class a decision involving a family matter or a deeply personal topic. While it is important to maintain an atmosphere of free and candid discussion, privacy must also be respected. Use judgment in addressing sensitive issues.

In discussing the completed charts, ask such questions as:

1. How were your personal values involved — the things you consider most important, including how you feel about yourself?
2. Did you find conflict between values? (Ex. being loyal to a friend vs. the value of honesty.)
3. In what ways do you think peer influence might affect your decision?
4. What can you do so that neither peer pressure nor influence leads to a wrong decision?
5. How might you use peer pressure or influence to help you make the right decision?

In discussing the last question, help students see that thinking through the decision-making steps, especially weighing the consequences, can help. It would also be useful to spend a few minutes talking about how members of the class can help each other make the best decisions.

Extending the Activity

1. The experience of keeping logs will make students aware of how decision making pervades their lives. Have students keep daily "decision logs" for one week: recording decisions made, how choices were made and what peer pressure influences were involved. The decision topics do not need to be life-shaping matters but rather everyday occurrences. (Ex. whether to buy a new CD or save the money; whether to finish homework or watch TV; whether to buy a new outfit or save the money for vacation.)
2. Interviewing parents or other adult family members can help open communication between students and families. Students can ask older family members about important decisions they had to make in their lives, including the factors that influenced the final decision.

ACTIVITY REACH FOR IT



Introduce this activity by reviewing the decision-making process and the generalizations that have emerged about peer pressure and peer influence. Then tell the students that they will have a chance to apply what they've learned to making decisions of their own in the coming year.

Initiate a discussion about goals the students might like to set for the coming year. Be sure students understand that these goals can be either something they would like to achieve or something they would like to avoid. Give examples for each, based on your knowledge of what is of greatest importance to the members of this particular class. (Ex. doing well in school, avoiding

the use of drugs, volunteering time to work with younger students.)

Part I

Distribute the activity sheets and allow time for students to list their goals. Remind them that the goals should be important to them. Encourage them to be realistic and to make the goals as specific as possible.

Part II

Although the analysis sheet looks simple, it requires serious thought and imagination. Each student must try to picture exactly what a best friend, other friends, parents or adult family members will do or say or expect that might affect this decision. They should also consider outside influences. Frequently, this act of reflecting or imagining is an eye-opening experience because it helps students think through the consequences of any choice.

When everyone has completed the analysis sheet, use the following ideas to guide discussion:

1. Some students are likely to find that friends, even a best friend, might be a negative influence. Ask the class if this means that the fear of losing a friend or not being accepted may lead them to do something they don't want to do. How can they overcome this anxiety about going against friends? Help students conclude that true friends will not press them to do something both parties think is wrong. Also, help students realize that doing what's best for one's own life and future is more important than going along with something friends are doing.
2. Some students will find that a parent or some other adult provides a strong influence as a role model. Encourage them to talk about this kind of positive influence and how it can help them

overcome self-doubt or other pressures.

3. In some areas of behavior, there is often a powerful connection between media images and peer influence. The connection is worth exploring. Many young people get their ideas of what is neat or cool from the media, especially television and film. (Ex. violence such as fights or reckless car rides.) Discuss how these media messages influence actions.

Extending the Activity

1. Literature can provide your students with valuable insights into growing up, setting goals and making life-shaping personal decisions. Biographies and autobiographies are particularly useful in creating models of the moral courage needed to make difficult decisions or to overcome negative influences.
2. Initiate a discussion about a goal to get in good physical shape, a decision that is made by many students in this age group. Focus on reasons why a person might make this decision — peer pressure (teasing about weight, the way one looks in clothes, going out for sports, etc.); peer influence (others think I'm fat or out of shape, all the popular kids are slim, etc.). Also talk about the choices and consequences that are pertinent to this decision. (Ex. diet, exercise, feel better, look better, more energy, anorexia, bulimia, use of drugs such as steroids or speed.)

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Adler, Patricia A. and Adler, Peter. *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*. Rutgers University, 1998.

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Dr. Keeling, Richard P. "Student Health in the 1990s." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Oct. 9, 1991, Vol. XXXVIII. No. 72.

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