

A child's poor decision-making skills can predict later behavior problems, research shows

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Children who show poor decision-making skills at age 10 or 11 may be more likely to experience interpersonal and behavioral difficulties that have the potential to lead to high-risk health behavior in their teen years, according to a new study from Oregon State University psychology professor.

"These findings suggest that less-refined decision [skills](#) early in life could potentially be a harbinger for problem [behavior](#) in the future," said Joshua Weller, an assistant professor in the School of Psychological Science in OSU's College of Liberal Arts.

However, if poor decision-making patterns can be identified while [children](#) are still young, parents, educators and health professionals may have an opportunity to intervene and help those children enhance these skills, said Weller, who studies individual differences in decision-making.

"This research underscores that decision-making is a skill and it can be taught," he said. "The earlier you teach these skills, the potential for improving outcomes increases."

His findings were published recently in the "Journal of Behavioral Decision Making." Co-authors are Maxwell Moholy of Idaho State University and Elaine Bossard and Irwin P. Levin of Iowa State

University. The research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

The researchers wanted to better understand how pre-adolescent children's decision-making skills predicted later behavior. To do so, they conducted follow-up assessments with children who had participated in a previous decision-making study.

About 100 children, ages 10 and 11, participated in the original study, where they answered questions that helped assess their decision-making skills. They were evaluated based on how they perceived the risks of a decision, their ability to use appropriate decision-making rules and whether their confidence about a decision matched their actual knowledge on a subject.

For the new study, researchers invited the original study participants - now 12 and 13 years old - and their parents back for a follow-up. In all, 76 children ages participated in the second study, which included a behavior assessment that was completed by both the parent and the child.

The behavior assessment included questions about emotional difficulties, conduct issues such as fighting or lying and problems with peers. Those kinds of behavioral issues are often linked to risky [health behavior](#) for teens, including substance abuse or high-risk sexual activity, Weller said.

Researchers compared each child's scores from the initial decision-making assessment to the child's and their parent's behavioral reports. They found that children who scored worse on the initial decision-making assessment were more likely to have behavioral problems two years later.

"Previous studies of decision-making were retrospective," Weller said. "To our knowledge, this is the first research to suggest how decision-

making competence is associated with future outcomes."

The research provides new understanding about the possible links between decision-making and high-risk behavior, Weller said. It also underscores the value of teaching decision-making and related skills such as goal-setting to youths. Some interventions have demonstrated promise in helping children learn to make better decisions, he said.

In another recent study, Weller and colleagues studied the decision-making tendencies of at-risk adolescent girls who had participated in an intervention program designed to reduce substance abuse and other risky behavior. The program emphasized self-regulation, goal-setting and anger management.

The study found that girls who received the intervention in fifth-grade demonstrated better decision-making skills when they were in high school than their at-risk peers who did not participate in the intervention program.

"Most people can benefit from decision-making training. Will it always lead to the outcome you wanted? No," Weller said. "However, it boils down to the quality of your decision-making process."

That is something that parents and other adults can help children learn. For instance, a parent can talk about difficult decisions with a child. By exploring multiple points of view or showing other people's perspectives on the issue, the child learns to consider different perspectives, he said.

"Following a good process when making decisions can lead to more favorable outcomes over time," Weller said. "Focus on the quality of the decision process, rather than the outcome."

Provided by Oregon State University

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