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Masterclass Educator Guide

The Brain Science Behind Decision Making

About the Video

Middle school is a unique period in a child's life, as students must simultaneously deal with their developing brains and bodies in combination with increasingly complex social situations. In this video, school counselor and therapist Phyllis Fagell discusses strategies that middle school students can use to make healthier choices during the decision-making process. She explains that while it is the default reaction for the brain's amygdala to take over and make rash decisions during adolescence, learning about the brain science behind their reactions, being equipped with a toolbox of decision-making skills, and identifying core values can help middle schoolers say no to taking dangerous risks and make healthy and safe decisions.



How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to help you incorporate the ideas presented by the counselor in this video into your own teaching. Included here, you will find reflection questions and activities to help you integrate the ideas presented in this video into your classroom. You may present all the content, or you may pick and choose the questions and activities that best meet the needs of you and your students.

Objectives

- Illustrate how exploring brain science, learning key strategies, and identifying personal values can strengthen students' decision-making skills.
- Equip educators with the background, knowledge, and tools needed to engage students in conversations and activities that promote self- and social-awareness.
- Encourage educators to engage authentically with students as they model healthy decision-making and how to say no to taking dangerous risks.



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Featured Educator

Phyllis Fagell

Phyllis Fagell is a certified professional school counselor and therapist. She has worked in public and private schools with students in grades K-12. She is currently a full-time school counselor at Sheridan School in Washington, D.C., and a therapist in private practice. Phyllis is also the author of "Middle School Matters," and "Middle School Superpowers: Raising Resilient Tweens in Turbulent Times," as well as a frequent contributor to *The Washington Post*.

Theme #1: Teach the Brain Science

An Overview

Phyllis explains that a middle schooler's brain is changing faster than it has at any other time in their life, other than from birth to age two. It can be hard to make decisions because the prefrontal cortex—which is the part of the brain responsible for decision making and logical thinking—is not fully developed yet. For this reason, when presented with peer pressure, pre-teens and teens tend to make decisions with the emotional part of their brain, called the amygdala. This part of the brain is responsible for immediate reactions like the fight, flight, or freeze response, and is more likely to make risky decisions than the prefrontal cortex.

In the Classroom

Considering brain science and development in the classroom is beneficial for both the educator and the students. Having an understanding of why they may react or behave the way that they do can empower students to take better control of their learning as they develop strategies that leverage the strengths of their evolving brains. This understanding can also promote a sense of self-awareness and resilience in students, helping them both in school and in life. For educators, having an understanding of students' brain development can help them create effective and caring learning environments. Giving middle school students, for example, interactive and experiential learning opportunities not only helps students practice their higher order thinking skills and use their prefrontal cortex but also gives students a chance to navigate their emotional responses in a safe environment so they are prepared to make healthy decisions and stand up for themselves or their friends.



"As a person who does struggle with mental health at some points, it was very good to learn how it actually works in your brain and what causes those emotions."

—Marley, 8th grader

Connections to Health, Wellness & Prevention: As one of the students in the video explains, understanding what is happening in their brains and what is causing their emotions can help adolescents deal with their feelings more effectively. Understanding brain development, especially the amygdala response and the development of the prefrontal cortex, is important for the health and wellness of pre-teens and teenagers. If adolescents understand that: 1) their prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision making, impulse control, and judgement is still in development, and 2) that their brain's amygdala is especially active and contributes to emotional intensity, they will gain a sense of self-awareness and an ability to self-regulate as they begin to understand their own behaviors, emotions, and decision-making processes.

Reflection Questions

- Do you engage students in conversations about what it feels like for their amygdala to hijack their decisions? Can you provide examples or stories from your own adolescence to help students relate?



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- Do you consider students' brain development when you select classroom learning activities?
- How could you provide additional opportunities to help students strengthen their prefrontal cortex and practice moderating their amygdala response?
- How can you give your students opportunities to learn more about brain science and the development of the human brain?
- How is understanding the brain a way to enhance prevention education?

Sample Activity

Provide small groups of students with several scenarios that could evoke strong emotional reactions. (For instance: A friend asks you to try alcohol when their parents aren't home or a student is wrongly accused of cheating.) Encourage students to discuss the emotions they may feel and act out how they may respond. Then, encourage them to take a step back and consider what they could do to manage these feelings and emotions, consider their choices, and responsibly decide how to respond. Wrap up with a discussion around the role of the amygdala and prefrontal cortex in each response, as well as why managing responses to strong reactions can be harder because their brains are still developing.

Theme #2: Fill Their Toolbox

An Overview

Tricky situations come in all shapes and sizes. For this reason, it is helpful for teens to have a toolbox of strategies that they can pull from when they find themselves in situations where decision-making may be difficult.

In the Classroom

Educators can explicitly teach and practice decision-making strategies with their students. For example, students can be taught specific tools to counter an amygdala attack—such as taking slow, deep breaths to calm their nervous system. Developing and practicing refusal strategies can provide students with ways to say “No” in stressful situations that they can keep in their back pocket. Students can also act out scenarios in advance so they understand what can get in the way of making good decisions and practice what it looks like to make responsible choices.

Connections to Health and Wellness & Prevention

Healthy decision-making is an essential part of health and wellness, as students' choices have the power to affect their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The ability to make healthy decisions and say no often depends on one's ability to consider the consequences of different options, as well as the student's levels of self-awareness, social-awareness, and empathy. Goal-setting can be an effective way to help adolescents make positive decisions.

Reflection Questions

- Do you share and/or model your own decisions, as well as the emotions and thought-processes behind them, with your students? What opportunities do you have to model this more frequently?
- In what situations do your students tend to make healthy and unhealthy decisions?
- When your students make unhealthy decisions, what factors seem to be at the root of their decision-making?
- How could you incorporate decision-making tools into your classroom so your students are equipped with a variety of tools to pick from when the need arises?

“Hearing my students talk about core strategies for overcoming that amygdala attack was very interesting. I was testing them as well because I know that even as adults, we're challenged with controlling our emotions. I myself now have strategies to pause and think.”

—Tanisha Johnson, 8th Grade Science teacher



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Sample Activity

Brainstorm a list of refusal strategies as a class. A refusal strategy is anything that can help a student say no or otherwise get out of a situation, such as simply saying, "No thanks, I'm good," or putting the blame on their parents. Record a list of refusal strategies on the board as students share. Then, give a small piece of paper or sticky note to each student, and encourage them to record the strategies that they think could work for them. Encourage them to store the list in a safe place or take a picture on their phone, so they can refresh their memory at any time.

Theme #3: Explore Their Values

An Overview

Values are the fundamental beliefs and principals that guide an individual's actions, choices, and behaviors. Values begin in childhood as children begin to develop a sense of what is important to them, and these values continue to grow and evolve through adolescence and adulthood.

In the Classroom

On an academic level, values can help students better understand character development in English Language Arts, as well as understand the choices that historical figures make in Social Studies. On a community level, values of respect and kindness in the classroom help foster an inclusive space where all students feel valued and safe to express themselves. A positive, values-based classroom sets clear expectations for positive behavior and a sense of accountability. It equips students with the tools they need to assess risks and deal with peer pressure, and it ultimately leads to a classroom in which members treat each other with respect.

Connections to Health and Wellness

An understanding of one's personal values can serve as a guiding force in personal decision-making. Values are like personal compasses; they help people make good choices that can positively impact their health and wellness. When individuals live by their values, they are more likely to build strong relationships, take care of their bodies, and be true to themselves.

Reflection Questions

- What are your core values? What role do they play in your life? Have you shared these with your students?
- How can you act as a role model to your students in order to show them how values can shape decision-making?
- Do you incorporate discussions about values into your classroom? How could you do this more?
- How can you increase opportunities for your students to put values like respect, integrity, responsibility, compassion, and perseverance into practice?

Sample Activity

Share a list of values (such as some or all of the values listed [here](#)) and challenge students to select 5–10 values that best reflect the people they want to be and the people they want to surround themselves with. Encourage students to write these values on a piece of paper that they can refer back to often. Then, divide the class into small groups and provide various real-life decisions that they may face. For each decision, ask them to discuss the values that could guide their decision-making, as well as why and how. Encourage students to pause and consider these values in the future before they make impulsive decisions.

"If they can do a gut check by consulting those values and asking themselves which decision is most consistent with these values, it's a way for them to pause and have a framework that's far more stable than that impulse decision that they may otherwise make."

—Tanisha Johnson, 8th Grade Science teacher