

# Making Smart Decisions

Your child has to make more and more choices as he grows up: which courses to take, how to handle relationships, whether to get a job, what to do after high school. You can help by giving him tools he needs to make good decisions. Try these tips.



## Discussion

Stay alert for opportunities to talk with your teen. She may not open up often, so be ready to listen when she does. Restate what she says, and keep your tone casual ("It sounds like you aren't sure you want to be around Lily since she's spending time with kids who drink").



If you sense that your child is struggling with a decision but she won't talk, try some conversation starters. You might share an article you read on the subject ("I read the other day that 25 percent of 14-year-olds have tried alcohol"). Or

ask a question: "I haven't heard much about Lily lately. What's going on with her?"

*Note:* Don't hesitate to be direct if you think your high schooler is in trouble. *Example:* "I'm afraid you're experimenting with alcohol. We need to talk."

## Experience

Decision making takes plenty of practice. Give your teen choices that aren't critical so she'll feel comfortable with the process when she has to make more serious decisions. *Examples:* Should she spend one afternoon a week volunteering at the animal shelter or taking swimming lessons? Should she cut her hair short or leave it long?

Encourage your child to think through her decisions. For instance, working at an animal shelter would give her experience and help her decide if she might enjoy a career as a veterinarian. If she takes swimming lessons, she may be able to try out for the team.

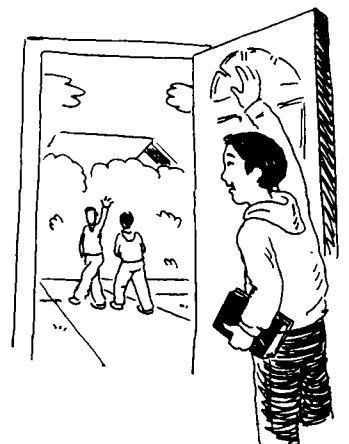
After your teen makes a choice, help her learn from the experience. If she's unhappy with her haircut, you might say, "It'll grow out soon, and next time you can try something different."

## Confidence

Teens with good self-esteem can make decisions more easily than those who are concerned about what others think of their choices.

If your child is struggling with peer pressure while making a decision, help him put it in perspective. For example, maybe he wants to join the school chorus but is afraid of what his basketball teammates will think. You might ask him if he'd rather spend an hour every day in an elective he doesn't like as much or brush off his teammates' comments and enjoy singing all year.

Or maybe he's torn between whether to go out with friends on Saturday or to stay home to study for a test. Remind him that he'll have plenty of other opportunities to spend time with friends and that he'll feel proud when he does well on his test.



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## Information

It's easier to make a decision—and feel good about it—if your child has the facts to back it up. For example, deciding to say no to dangerous behavior like trying drugs is challenging for teens.

Together, look up the effects of various drugs (memory loss, heart problems, addiction). Talk about how drug use can affect her schoolwork and friendships (her grades could drop, she might lose friends who don't use drugs). Then, discuss ways for her to say no. *Examples:* "No, thanks. My parents would ground me for the rest of my life!" "No way. I'll be kicked off the team if I get caught."

## Support

High schoolers don't have to make choices alone. Encourage your child to build a network of people who can help him with decisions. Trusted teachers and coaches, his guidance counselor, your religious leader, good friends, and, of course, his parents and other relatives can all help him.

For example, suggest that he get to know his guidance counselor. That way, he'll feel more comfortable approaching her when he's choosing a college major or figuring out how to handle a classmate who's pressuring him to cheat.

*Tip:* Encourage your teen to find a support group of peers (SADD, Alateen) who can help him make good choices, like staying safe on prom night or speaking up when a friend is driving unsafely. He can check with churches or hospitals or look in your local newspaper for groups, meeting locations, and times.

## Imagination

Teach your teen to be creative by considering unusual solutions when making a decision.

For instance, maybe she's deciding between getting a part-time job and joining the school computer club. She might be able to do both if she chooses a job with flexible



hours. Encourage her to talk to older kids who have worked in different types of jobs. She may discover that working as a tutor or a babysitter, for instance, would allow her to set hours that wouldn't interfere with club activities.

Or suppose she wants to save her money for a new pair of running shoes. She might decide to create a budget for her allowance money. By cutting expenses (eating at home instead of buying fast food, for example), she may find that she has more money for things she needs.

## Options

Be sure your child considers all possibilities when he's making an important decision. For example, when deciding on college, help him see what's out there so he can choose the college that's right for him.

Suggest that he research his options and come up with a system for evaluating each one. Does he want to attend a big school or a small school? Would he like to be close to home or farther away? Suggest that he assign a point value to each attribute. School size might be worth 5 points, while weather equals 1 point. He can add up each school's points and rank them from highest to lowest.

Encourage your teen to try this system for other choices, such as which sport to play, how to spend birthday money, or what subject to major in.



## Negotiation

If you and your high schooler disagree on an important decision, try to reach a compromise. Perhaps she wants to date a boy you believe is too old for her. Tell her that she can invite him home for dinner or go to the movies in a group. But you might draw the line at allowing her to get into his car or to spend time alone with him.

Or if she wants a tattoo and you're opposed, you might suggest that she get a temporary henna tattoo. Explain your reasoning:

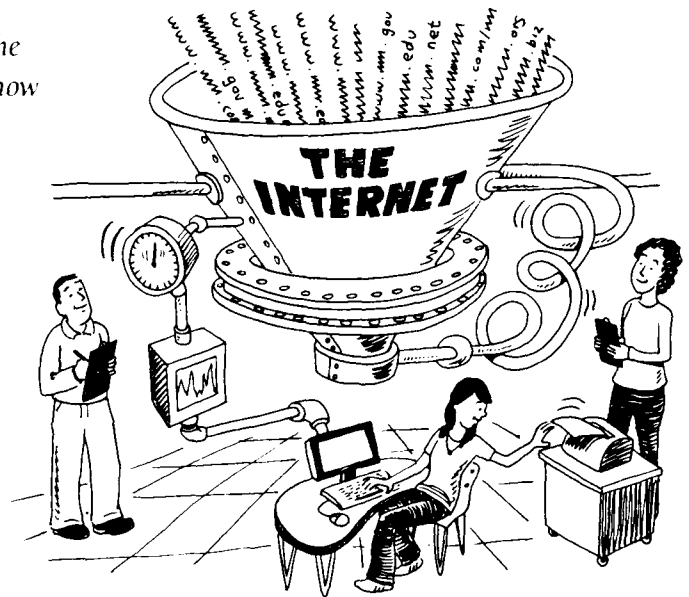
"When you're older, you can make more permanent decisions for yourself. For now, let's think of a temporary way you can try a new look."

*Tip:* Let your teen know that you're proud of her for becoming more independent. Listen to the reasons behind her decisions, and set a date for revisiting ones that you veto. *Example:* "Next summer we'll talk about one-on-one dating again."

## High School Years

# WEB LITERACY

High school is full of research projects. Your teen may use the computer for games and chatting with friends, but does she know how to do research on the Internet? Share these tools and tips to help her learn where to search, what to look for, and how to recognize information that is accurate and relevant.



## SEARCH ENGINES

Different kinds of search engines will give your child different results. Encourage him to try a variety.

### GENERAL SEARCH ENGINES

Does your teen have a favorite search engine? If he always goes straight to Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) or Yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)), suggest that he try a few other engines to see if he finds one he likes better. Quintura ([www.quintura.com](http://www.quintura.com)), for instance, is a “visual” engine: in addition to a straightforward list, it gives a “cloud” of related words that shift and change as your child moves his mouse over them. He may also want to try Ask ([www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com)), Cuil ([cuil.com](http://cuil.com)), MSN Live Search ([www.live.com](http://www.live.com)), and AltaVista ([www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com)).

### SPECIALTY ENGINES

Some search engines focus on a particular topic. To find one of these, your teen can type his subject and “search engine” into a regular engine. For instance, “history search engine” will give him [www.historybuff.com](http://www.historybuff.com). He can also visit [www.searchenginefinder.com](http://www.searchenginefinder.com), a directory of subject-specific engines.

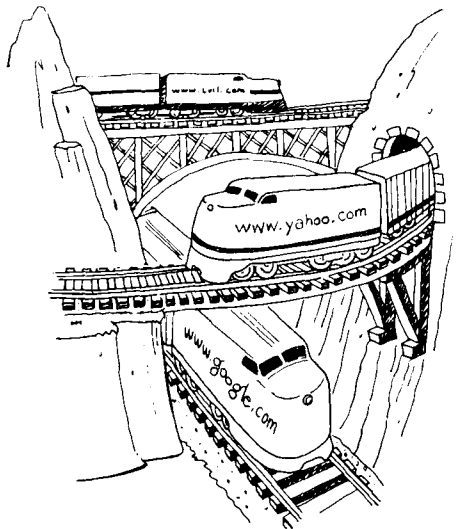
### CUSTOM ENGINES

By creating his very own search engine at [www.google.com/coop/csc](http://www.google.com/coop/csc), your child can search for facts within a list of Web pages he has chosen. He'll need to

register, pick a title for his engine, and list URLs that he wants to include. This is a good way to keep track of his sources and organize his research.

### METASEARCH ENGINES

Your high schooler may be surprised to learn that an engine doesn't search the entire Internet. Luckily, he can search several engines at once with a single click in a metasearch engine. You might suggest PolyMeta ([www.polymeta.com](http://www.polymeta.com)), Zuula ([www.zuula.com](http://www.zuula.com)), Info ([www.info.com](http://www.info.com)), or MetaCrawler ([www.metacrawler.com](http://www.metacrawler.com)).



## SEARCH STRATEGIES

If your teen uses only the first few links that appear in a search, she may miss out on other great sites. Encourage her to dig deeper with these tips:

- List questions. What exactly does your teen want to know about her topic? Suggest that she come up with specific questions. *Examples:* “Where are coral reefs located?” “Why do we need coral reefs?” “How many coral reefs are there in the United States?” Then, she can type those questions into a search engine.
- Let a search engine automatically narrow a topic. For instance, typing “coral reefs” into Yahoo will give your child a drop-down box with subtopics like “importance of coral reefs,” “types of coral reefs,” and “destruction of coral reefs.” Other engines, like Ask and Cuil, offer a sidebar with related categories, subtopics, or search terms. Your teenager can keep narrowing down her search until she finds exactly what she's looking for.

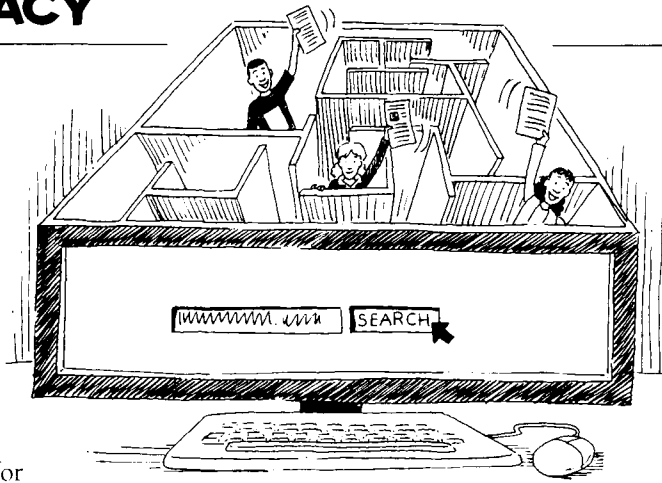
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**Safety Note:** Be sure your child practices safe Internet surfing. Remind him never to give out personal information that could identify him, such as his last name, address, phone number, or school. You can use the parental controls that come with your browser to help ensure safe surfing, and review each site to determine its appropriateness for your child.

■ Explore other search features. For example, most engines have an “advanced search” or “options” link that will let your teen request sites from a particular country or source (news story, journal article, blog). She can also specify sites that do not include particular words. If she’s searching for “Madagascar coral reefs” and wants sites only about the country and not about a movie, she would type “Madagascar coral reefs –movie” (attach a minus sign to the word you want left out).

■ Many teens begin their research on Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)). It’s a collaborative Web site, or “wiki,” that is written and edited by users. Since anyone in the world can add to Wikipedia, remind your youngster to always check the facts she finds there. She can also use the references and links at the bottom of each Wikipedia entry to do more research.

■ If your teen isn’t sure what her topic will be, a Web directory might be a smart place to start. This is a collection of sites organized into categories. For example, the Internet Public Library ([www.ipl.org](http://www.ipl.org)) has headings such as “Arts & Humanities” and “Law & Government.” Other directories include [http://lii.org](http://http://lii.org), [www.awesomelibrary.org](http://www.awesomelibrary.org), and [www.dmoz.org](http://www.dmoz.org).



## CITING INTERNET SOURCES

Online information should be treated just like material in books. Remind your teen that it is plagiarism to copy word-for-word. Also, she must list sources for information that’s not common knowledge (example: Neil Armstrong was the first person to walk on the moon). She should ask her teacher how he wants Web pages to be cited.

## EVALUATING INFORMATION

The Internet contains so much information that it can be difficult to know which sites are reliable. These tips can help:

■ Look at the URL. Educational organizations (.edu) and government agencies (.gov) are usually reliable Web sources. Commercial Web sites (.com), nonprofit organizations (.org), and small business sites (.biz) can also have legitimate information, but your teen will need to evaluate them more carefully. He can search just for URLs ending in .gov or .edu by using an engine’s “advanced search” feature. Or he can add “site:.edu” (no space between the colon and the period) before the search terms. For instance, typing “site:.edu health” will pull up health sites published by schools.



■ Learn about the person or organization behind a Web site. A link at the bottom of the page may give credentials (books a person has published, organizations a group is affiliated with). Urge your teenager to avoid “sponsored links” on search engines. These paid advertisements usually appear in a shaded box at the top of the page or in their own column.

■ Check the date. Scan the page to find out when it was last updated. There may be a dateline at the top of an article or a copyright date at the bottom of the site.

*Tip:* Remind your teen to double-check all information. He should always verify facts by looking them up on more than one site.

## ORGANIZING ONLINE INFORMATION

**BOOKMARKING.** Your child can use his browser’s bookmark or “favorites” feature to save the address of each Web site he uses for an assignment. He’ll want to keep all his bookmarked sites in one computer folder with the name of his project. He can even create a shortcut so that this folder is accessible from his computer’s desktop. Another option is to save his URLs online at a social bookmarking site such as [www.diigo.com](http://www.diigo.com) or <http://delicious.com>.



These allow him to access his links from any computer by signing into his free account. He can also share great sites with friends.

**NOTE TAKING.** If your teen is already on the computer doing research, suggest that she save time by taking notes in a word processing document. She should be careful not to cut and paste information from a Web site into her project, unless she’s quoting something directly. Instead, she should read each section and then summarize important points in her own words.

## High School Years