



DECISION
EDUCATION
FOUNDATION

Better Decisions - Better Lives

A photograph of a room with a wooden floor and several rows of yellow chairs with attached writing tablets. The chairs are arranged in a circular pattern, suggesting a group setting for a workshop or counseling session. A semi-transparent white banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title text.

Improving Advisory and Counseling with Decision Quality

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I. Introduction to Curriculum Materials and Resources

Advisory and counseling programs are central to many schools, offering rich opportunities to engage young people around personal and academic choices as well as life skills. By building school culture and community relationships, these programs are vital components of educational institutions. With that in mind, it is important to note that advisory and counseling programs vary greatly from institution to institution. Degrees of design – formality, frequency, and intensity – as well as purpose mark some of the most striking differences.

Despite the variations among advisory and counseling programs, they all share a common interest in empowering young people, building communities, and disseminating information. DEF recognizes the differences and commonalities among these programs. As a result, these materials have been designed with an adaptable purpose in mind. They fit different advisory and counseling needs, while maintaining a central focus on building decision-making skills among young people.

The primary goal of *Improving Advisory and Counseling with Decision Quality* and its curriculum is to help young people make better decisions in their lives. Youth face many challenges of different types and magnitudes. These materials are designed to help them make better decisions, particularly when confronted with difficult situations. The course and accompanying curriculum also serve to help adults familiar with decision quality apply decision concepts to advisory and counseling relationships. By becoming adept at decision concepts and skills, adults are better able to aid young people in making decisions. In turn, these adults become natural leaders as advisors and counselors.

Adults using these materials will be able to: 1) deepen their understanding of decision concepts and skills; 2) utilize decision skills as a way to achieve existing advisory and counseling goals; 3) explore successful lesson plans and resources; 4) develop or enhance existing curriculum by using prompts provided here; and 5) create authentic advisor and counselor relationships.

Preparation

The ideal way to use this material is to first spend time instructing young people on decision concepts, thereby giving them a basis for which to apply decision skills. Not all advisories or counseling settings are suited for preparation around fundamentals, but DEF strongly encourages introductory training around decision concepts as a



way to build a strong understanding among students for the skills they will be learning. This training can happen in a number of ways. **The *Decision Chain and Stop, Think and Decide* posters**, available from DEF, are useful visual reminders for young people, and can be placed around one's institution. Similarly, it is important to define terms from the very beginning, so an expanded glossary has been provided in the resources section of this material. At a very basic level, young people should understand the definitions for key Decision Chain concepts and related issues, including the following:

Declaring: When one declares a decision, one consciously creates space for a choice rather than passively going with the flow. Declaring is vital to good decision making because it allows one to recognize the decision opportunity.

Helpful Frame: When one frames a problem, one determines how to address the pertinent issue or opportunity that calls for a decision. When discussing framing, it is important to understand the role of the purpose, perspective, and scope in a decision.

Clear Values: Values are what one cares about (based on what one wants, needs, dislikes, etc.). Because of one's values, someone might prefer one consequence of a decision over another. Values may be direct or indirect, personal or cultural, and constant or situational.

Creative Alternatives: An alternative is one of the possible courses of action available. When thinking of alternatives, it is important to be creative and expansive.

Useful Information: Information consists of all the things that one knows, would like to know, or should know that might influence the decision. Information is not under the decision maker's control, but the decision maker can choose to seek out the most helpful information for the decision at hand.

Sound Reasoning: Reasoning is how one combines alternatives, information, and values to arrive at a decision. Logically correct reasoning is critical to making decisions.

Decision Fitness: Decision Fitness, a component of one's reasoning, is highly developed when time is short, and one uses preestablished rules to make in the moment quality decisions.



Commitment to Follow Through: Commitment to follow through means one is ready to act and has the ability to follow through in a purposeful manner. Until a person has committed and followed through, a decision cannot be defined as such.

A great way to introduce some of these terms is to use the **Decision Quality PowerPoint slide pack**, provided upon request by DEF, in conjunction with an anecdote rich lecture or discussion. Program Directors at DEF can assist adults with the best ways to use these slides. Simply introducing the terminology, however, is not sufficient. Adults teaching decision skills to young people should devote as much time as possible to understanding fundamental concepts first.

Decision Quality: The Fundamentals for Making Good Decisions is another excellent beginning resource that many adults find invaluable while working through these lessons. Educators have used this manual – which provides extensive information beyond just definitions – to directly teach young people decision concepts. Sharing all or a part of the booklet can be a valuable way to introduce young people to the decision concepts they will need in order to reap the full benefits of the curriculum. Copies of *Decision Quality: The Fundamentals for Making Good Decisions* may be ordered from DEF.

Returning to tools learned in ***Decision Quality for Educators*** is another excellent way to help support learning among young people. For example, the Decision Demonstration is an important short exercise for revealing how decisions are separate from their outcomes. Similarly, the Khoosh ball exercise, developed and used in *Decision Quality for Educators*, is an excellent way to define framing, easily and quickly. Using tools learned in *Decision Quality for Educators* will go a long way towards developing strong conceptual understanding among young people, before they move on to application skills. DEF staff members can help review these exercises and provide coaching.

DEF can also make additional recommendations for preparing students with the right tools, so that they are successfully challenged by these exercises and lessons.

Curriculum

The curriculum is designed to be user friendly for adults and engaging for young people. Many of the lessons can be customized or easily adapted to fit specific advising and counseling needs. For example, a scenario focused on alternatives might easily also be appropriate for discussing information or values. Similarly, an



issues raising scenario is also applicable to a discussion about framing or stakeholders. Many of the lessons can also be easily adapted to time constraints. They are richly complex so that one lesson can be the topic of discussion for several advisory meetings, depending on the level of depth and breadth that the adult would like the group to achieve.

DEF has provided a range of instructional materials suited for different teaching styles and advisory approaches, settings, and sizes. The curriculum includes the following materials, with description and guidance for utilizing each in advisory:

- Discussion/Fishbowl Prompts
- Case Studies and Scenarios
- Role Plays
- Engaging Exercises
- Comprehensive Lesson Plans

Generally, fishbowls allow students to occupy various roles and vantage points as decision makers within a safe space. Students take turns speaking and listening to one another, with opportunities to be active participants and reflective listeners in a discussion. Advisors should expect to spend about 30 minutes on a rich and inclusive discussion.

Case studies and scenarios provide opportunities to step back from decisions and analyze them in a more intense yet detached manner. These two types of activities focus on decisions that students are likely to encounter in their daily lives and hone in on particular aspects of high quality decision making. DEF has designed situations that are intentionally multi faceted and complex, and students and adults should allow at least 20-30 minutes for completion.

Role plays give students the chance to walk a mile in others' shoes safely, providing a forum for young people to explore, discuss, and analyze decisions from an intimate first person perspective. Advisees work together in small groups to identify and select pertinent situations to act out, following a three part preparation-action-reflection model to deliberate, enact, and debrief on the decision situations they have chosen. Adults guide students in these activities, which can be completed in 40-60 minutes at a minimum but advisably over the course of 2-3 days.

The engaging exercises are designed to be instructive, fun, and collaborative. These are great activities to make decision concepts and skills experiential while building



relationships among young people. Students and advisors should expect to take at least 30 minutes to engage with these.

The comprehensive lessons attempt to draw important decision concepts and skills out through engaging plans that take a minimum of one hour but quite easily can be customized to fit several advisory meetings.

Activities follow a scope and sequence of increasing complexity, with respect to the depth and breadth of topic exploration, elements of decision making, and comfort level of the advisory group. At the same time, each type of material provided encompasses a broad range of difficult decisions that may be explored according to variable timelines. Advisors have ultimate discretion over advisory curriculum and will make decisions with regards to covering complex or controversial topics. Advisors are free to experiment with and reverse situations, if they wish to make them applicable to male or female students, and some activities include suggestions for doing so. DEF's intent is to arm advisors and counselors with an array of activities from which to choose in flexible order, in order to meet the diverse needs of their advisories. The table of contents facilitates searching for materials by topic, decision skill, type of activity, and other attributes.

Resources and Additional Support

Resources have been provided that span from decision focused worksheets to a glossary to links for more information. Additional support may be requested from DEF. To receive guidance using these materials or to seek support for general decision-making questions, please contact DEF at 650-475-4474 or visit DEF at www.decisioneducation.org.



1. Overview of Discussion/Fishbowl Prompts

Summary and Objectives:

Fishbowls position students in concentric circles and create safe spaces in which young people take turns listening, reflecting, and speaking about their decision-making experiences, following a prompt from their advisor.

Successful fishbowls encourage honest engagement and active listening in safe contexts.

Instructions:

Advisors have the flexibility to organize fishbowls in a variety of ways. One successful model includes one small group (e.g., 4-6 people) arranged in a circle surrounded by a larger group (e.g., 8-10 people) arranged in a circle so that visually one sees two concentric circles.

With this setup young people in the inner circle speak freely, responding to a prompt from the adult. The outer group listens but does not respond to what is being said in the small group. Once the small group has had some time to explore a topic, individuals from that inner fishbowl can begin to trade places with people from the larger group. Eventually, the inner circle will get entirely recycled with new participants. As a way to conclude the exercise the adult discusses with participants how it felt to listen to others and to share important information in this context. Fishbowls can be tailored for various times, but one should expect to spend about 30 minutes to allow for ample discussion and rotation.

Roles and Perspectives:

Fishbowls are excellent ways to divide a group so that some speak, others listen, and all reflect upon their decision making.

Students alternate between an active yet detached perspective as intent and reflexive listeners while others share their stories, and an engaged and thoughtful stance as they take turns sharing their own decision experiences. Fishbowls require a baseline comfort level among students and students-advisor, but they also facilitate the development of trust among participants.



2. Overview of Case Studies and Scenarios

Summary and Objectives:

In general, case studies and scenarios are helpful tools for allowing young people to explore decision contexts from engaged but safely detached perspectives, in both small and large groups, depending on advisory needs.

These activities allow students to step back from decisions and analyze third parties' decisions in a more intense yet detached manner.

Instructions:

Case studies and scenarios present complex contexts that young people might easily encounter, and they focus on certain aspects of decision concepts and skills. These situations are deliberately complex and represent decision contexts that might require significant time and resources to tackle. For purposes of application, certain aspects of the case studies and scenarios have been highlighted. These lessons have been written for small group exploration led by an adult and can usually be completed in a minimum of 20-30 minutes.

Roles and Perspectives:

Students work together as analysts and thinkers to assess decision-making elements and patterns and imagine viable alternatives.



3. Overview of Role Plays

Summary and Objectives:

Role plays can be useful by requiring young people to adopt personas and explore, challenge, and debate issues in a non-threatening first person manner. The role plays presented reflect in the moment, real time decisions that students might have to make quickly or without much time to delve into various decision concepts. When using role plays a three part model is most useful: 1) preparation; 2) action; and 3) reflection. These steps are important elements to any exercise when young people are asked to delve into sensitive or challenging materials such as these role plays.

Instructions:

To prepare, the participants should read the role play situation and then be broken into small groups. In the small groups the participants identify at least three ways that the decision maker in the role play could handle the situation, and then select two of these to act out. Each person in the group should have a role. Participants should be sure to show the potential consequences of the decision maker's actions.

Ideally participants would have a break of a day or more between preparation and action, to allow time to think about the role play situations that they have decided to act out. After the role plays have been enacted, it is important to allow time for reflection and debriefing in the form of written comments or a discussion. The role plays have been written for small group exploration led by an adult and can be completed in 40-60 minutes at a minimum. It is advised, though, that these exercises be completed over two or more days to provide time for ample preparation and reflection.

Roles and Perspectives:

Students undertake various roles during the role play, including planning, reflecting, brainstorming, collaborating, revising, selecting, acting, forecasting, and assessing decisions, consequences, and alternatives. Because students are intimately involved in every phase of the role playing creation and enacting process, while the actual role play situations pertain to third parties, students adopt an intense yet safe first person perspective.



4. Overview of Engaging Exercises

Summary and Objectives:

The engaging exercises intend to raise the energy level of advisory classrooms, as they require active and hands on collaboration. These activities are experiential in nature and support relationship- and community building among students, as well as among students and their advisors.

Instructions:

Engaging exercises require less preparation and more action than other curricular activities presented. They are more spontaneous and experiential in nature, with interactions and revelations taking place in an ongoing fashion. Engaging scenarios hone in on community building within advisories, through the lens of decision making. Students and adults share and discuss decision experiences in fun and engaging ways that bring the group closer together, when done properly.

Advisors read the engaging scenario prompts and guide their students through the activities. Some activities call for breaking up the students into smaller groups and others can be completed as a large group. Students and adults should expect to spend at least 30 minutes with these activities.

Roles and Perspectives:

Students occupy various roles, depending on the exercise chosen by the advisor, but each case requires active participation (whether in the form of speaking, listening, brainstorming, or acting) from students. Some exercises elicit the sharing of personal experiences while others entail analysis of third party decisions, therefore students can occupy engaged yet safe perspectives that are both detached and intimate.



5. Overview of Comprehensive Lesson Plans

Summary and Objectives:

Activities thus far have been more granular in nature, with the intent of allowing students to delve into several components of the chain or elements of decision making at a time. DEF's lesson plans synthesize the decision-making skills practiced thus far so that students can explore one decision in greater detail from start to finish. Advisors can customize lesson plans with respect to length, intensity of engagement, and topics covered, to fit their advisories' needs.

Instructions:

Most of the lessons are applicable and appropriate for all grade levels, except for those geared specifically towards postsecondary options. Advisors may select to use lessons for post high school planning with junior and senior students. When a lesson addresses multiple elements of effective decision making, the central ones are listed in bold. Advisories can complete each lesson in a longer class period of about 60 minutes or two shorter ones of about 30 minutes each. These are rich lesson plans, however, that create the conditions for students and advisors to engage in complex discussions. In order to maximize the effectiveness of each lesson, DEF recommends preparing, executing, and reflecting on these complicated decisions over the course of several advisory meetings.

Each lesson plan engages students both intellectually and experientially through a variety of roles. Participants are encouraged to adopt different perspectives as they take turns listening, creating, speaking, analyzing, and recrafting their decision-making approaches. Students identify, design, and evaluate decisions as a group and individually, and therefore have much agency in these activities. These lesson plans can be very empowering for young people, especially when they interact with adults in a collaborative way. Advisors have the opportunity to work with their advisees in the capacity of allies who provide guidance and answer questions, while allowing students the space to be creative and make/correct mistakes in order to improve their decision-making abilities.

Each lesson informs teachers as to what supplies, if any, they will need, in addition to the DEF booklet *Decision Quality: The Fundamentals of Making Good Decisions*. In cases where additional resources are necessary, these are free and publicly available, or advisors can contact DEF in order to access.



DEF encourages advisors to follow students' progress with decision making, as formally or informally as applicable. Much of this type of inductive work transpires when the students undertake role plays, fishbowl discussions, and the other activities in the curriculum. When advisories are reflecting on decisions together, students can share similar decisions/dilemmas they have faced in their lives both within and outside of school.

Assessment:

DEF also provides guidelines for evaluating students' progress with decision quality principles, according to the following criteria:

- 1) **Basic** understanding means a student comprehends some, but not all, stated objectives and key messages. Students with basic understanding are unable to fully apply the purpose of the lesson to reaching similar decisions in the future.
- 2) **Proficient** understanding means a student comprehends the stated objectives and key messages of the lesson. Students with proficient understanding can apply the purpose of the lesson to reaching similar decisions in the future.
- 3) **Advanced** understanding means a student comprehends the stated objectives and key messages of the lesson, while being able to integrate extension/related activities or outside applications to their learning. Students with advanced understanding can apply the purpose of the lesson to making difficult decisions in the future.

Good decision making does not end when class does. Advisors should feel free to encourage students to apply the skills they have learned to decisions they face in their daily lives. Students can research examples of similar situations to those discussed in their own lives and communities, as well as in literature, history, pop culture, and the media. They can in turn present and discuss these in advisory. Students can also write/discuss a time when either they or someone they know made a difficult decision, and whether they would have approached the decision differently had they been armed with the decision-making skills then that they now possess.



Roles and Perspectives:

These comprehensive activities call on students to brainstorm and generate ideas, freewrite, discuss, role play, enact, analyze decisions, and reflect individually and in groups. Ideally, students will already have a basic familiarity with the six elements of the Decision Chain, as well as decision-making concepts like balancing emotion and reason.

