ADULTS SAVING KIDS
Founded by Alvin Erickson

Lesson 7

Teaching Children to Think Downstream

Helping Children Anticipate Consequences and Make Wise Decisions

SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 22:3

"The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty."

Proverbs 22:3 (NIV)

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Learning to Look Ahead

One of the most valuable skills we can teach children is the ability to think beyond the present moment. While young children naturally focus on what they want or feel right now, they gradually develop the ability to anticipate consequences, consider alternatives, and make thoughtful decisions as they mature. However, this ability does not develop automatically; it grows through experience, guidance, and practice.

Proverbs reminds us that true wisdom includes recognizing potential danger and taking steps to avoid it. Ultimately, we want our children to learn to ask not only *"What do I want to do?"* but also *"What might happen next?"*—which is what we mean by thinking downstream.

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Teaching Children to Think Through Choices

Imagine a child who wants to ride a bicycle down a steep hill. Rather than simply saying, *"Don't do that,"* a parent might ask:

> - *"What do you think will happen as you go faster?"*
> - *"What would you do if you needed to stop suddenly?"*
> - *"Is there a safer place to ride?"*

These questions encourage the child to consider consequences before acting. As children grow older, the situations become much more complicated—such as being invited to a party where alcohol is available, being encouraged by a friend to share a private photograph, or encountering someone online asking them to keep a conversation secret.

The same thinking skills apply in all these scenarios: What could happen if I do this? What could happen if I don't? Is someone pressuring me to decide quickly? What might I wish I had considered beforehand? Who could help me think this through? Wisdom often begins simply with learning to pause long enough to consider what comes next.

Have Conversations Before the Situation Arises

The best time to discuss difficult decisions is often long before a child actually faces them. Parents can introduce age-appropriate conversations about friendships, honesty, peer pressure, alcohol, drugs, sexuality, online relationships, and personal safety. These conversations shouldn't consist merely of warnings about everything that might go wrong; instead, we can invite children to think through realistic situations together.

For example, we might ask: *"Suppose you're at a party and the person who drove you there has been drinking. What would you do?"* If the child suggests finding another ride or calling a parent, we can reinforce that thinking by reminding them of the promise we discussed in Lesson 6: *"Call us. We'll come and get you. Your safety comes first."*

Another conversation might involve someone pressuring a teenager to do something they feel uncomfortable with: *"What could you say?" "What if the person keeps pressuring you?" "How could you leave the situation?"* Practicing possible responses in advance can make it much easier to recognize options when the situation actually occurs.

Understanding Pressure and Manipulation

People do not always make decisions under calm, ideal circumstances. Fear, embarrassment, excitement, loneliness, the desire to belong, or pressure from friends can heavily affect judgment, meaning even teenagers who understand a risk may struggle to act on that knowledge when emotions run high or others are watching. This is why discussing consequences is only part of the preparation.

Children also need to recognize when someone is attempting to influence them through pressure, secrecy, threats, or promises. A useful question to teach is: *"Would I make this same decision if I had time to think about it and wasn't being pressured?"* If the answer is no, that is a clear reason to pause, leave the situation, or seek advice from a trusted adult. Children should also know they can change their minds, withdraw consent, or ask for help even if they initially agreed to something, and that if someone deceives, threatens, or exploits them, responsibility for that harmful behavior always belongs entirely to the person who chose to do it.

Learning from Decisions Without Losing Self-Worth

Not every decision will be a good one, and children will sometimes act impulsively, overlook consequences, or make mistakes despite our best efforts to prepare them. When this happens, we can help them reflect on what they learned without condemning their identity.

Instead of asking only *"Why did you do that?"* we might ask:

> - *"What were you thinking might happen?"*
> - *"Was there something you didn't anticipate?"*
> - *"What would you do differently if you faced that situation again?"*

This approach reinforces our earlier lessons about correction, growth, and secure identity, showing that a poor decision can become an opportunity to develop better judgment rather than a permanent definition of who the child is.

Wisdom, Faith, and Discernment

Christian teaching encourages us to seek wisdom rather than simply following our immediate desires. Proverbs reminds us that recognizing danger and taking appropriate precautions are expressions of wisdom, and we can also teach children to pause and pray when uncertain, asking God for wisdom and guidance. As children mature, our goal is not merely for them to remember their parents' rules, but to develop the ability to recognize what is right, consider consequences, and make decisions consistent with their values and faith—even when no parent is present.

Even with thoughtful preparation, children will sometimes make poor decisions or find themselves in situations they could not have anticipated. As parents, we need to remind them that knowing what to do and always being able to do it are not the same thing. We might say:

> *"We've talked about how to make good decisions, but I know things don't always go as planned. If something goes wrong, please come to me. We'll sort it out together. You don't have to handle it alone."*

This reassurance is especially vital when a child feels embarrassed, frightened, or ashamed. While there may be consequences to address or problems to resolve, those can always be worked through together, because our goal is not to raise children who never make mistakes, but to raise children who have the wisdom to make good choices and the confidence to ask for help when they need it.

Questions for Reflection

1. Am I giving my child opportunities to think through decisions, or do I usually provide the answers before they have considered the possibilities?
2. What situations might my child encounter in the coming year that we could begin discussing now, before they face pressure to make a decision?

THIS WEEK

Put It Into Practice

Choose one realistic, age-appropriate situation and talk through it with your child. Rather than beginning with a warning or lecture:

- Describe a situation your child might encounter.
- Ask what choices they think they would have.
- Explore the possible consequences of each choice.
- Discuss what pressure or manipulation might look like.
- Help them identify a safe response and someone they could turn to for help.

At the end of the conversation, ask: *"What do you think would be the wisest choice, and why?"*

LOOKING AHEAD

A Thought to Carry Forward

We cannot make every decision for our children, nor should we want to, as our responsibility is to help them develop the wisdom, judgment, and confidence to make thoughtful choices for themselves. When children learn to pause, recognize pressure, consider consequences, and seek guidance, they become better prepared to navigate situations we may never even know they encounter.

In our next lesson, we will explore how children develop personal convictions and boundaries that help them stand firm when others try to influence their choices.