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# Judgment: Navigating Choices and Decisions

Judy Willis, M.D., M.Ed.

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Students need good judgment to successfully navigate the sea of information in their academic lives, as well as for the social and emotional choices and decisions they will inevitably face. For all of this, students require the executive function of **judgment** to monitor their understanding and interpretations. Judgment is critical for thoughtful consideration of their choices and the consequences of their actions. In this post, I'll suggest ways that you can activate your students' neuroplasticity to strengthen their brains' developing neural networks that support judgment.

In my previous posts in this series, I offered strategies to build students' organizing and prioritizing skillsets. Those judgment-strengthening experiences are adaptable for students from elementary through high school, but this discussion will focus on students in their early teens -- a critical period when their responsiveness to peer and social influences peaks as they strive to create their individual identities.

This is also a time when their prefrontal cortex (PFC) control centers transition into leaner, more efficient networks for making decisions and achieving goals. Further, their brains are in a highly responsive developmental state to build stronger "wiring" as they use these networks. By providing your students with guided experiences to use judgment, recognize the consequences of decisions, and adjust for better choices the next time, you'll promote stronger judgment skillsets and might possibly save their lives.

## Academic and Cognitive Judgment

### *1. Recognize existing judgment skills.*

Ask questions inviting a variety of opinions that they can support with facts or background knowledge that they already have, such as:

- Why do you think the author used this literary device (e.g. first- or third-person narrator)?
- How could the colonists have acted differently to limit casualties in the Revolutionary War?
- What evidence can show you that a word problem will require subtraction?
- How could we find out what shape of container boxes could hold the most cargo?

After they answer these types of questions thoughtfully, let them know that they exercised judgment when they *delayed jumping to conclusions* and *considered the evidence*.

## *2. Encourage judgments of value.*

Have students extract a valuable big idea -- the essence of a lecture, discussion, or reading assignment -- and summarize it in a tweet format. They can share responses on a class webpage, wiki, or Moodle, or simply on a paper with 140 character spaces. As Einstein said, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it." When students evaluate information and define the most essential ideas, they build *judgment skills* and *concept understanding*.

## *3. Guide opportunities for self-checking strategies.*

Students can develop judgment through estimating in math, reading their essays aloud to themselves for better editing, or waiting to answer challenging test questions until looking for clues in subsequent questions.

## *4. Promote metacognition.*

Metacognition activates the neural networks of executive function each time students consider what they did that worked well and what they would do differently.

## **Social-Emotional Judgment**

When students make more of their own decisions during the adolescent and teen years, their brains are still programmed for immediate gratification, pushing limits, and exploring rather than thoughtfully considering consequences. Adolescent brains are highly responsive to the dopamine-pleasure response that accompanies taking chances and pushing limits, and sadly, this age group's death rate from preventable causes is higher than at any other time of life.

When you give students opportunities to make considered decisions and guide their evaluation of possible consequences before acting on first impulses, they will build the judgment needed to resist their developmental programming for immediate rewards. Providing them with time and incentive to reflect will help them build the foundations from which to wisely use the flexibility and exploratory drives unique to their adolescent brains.

## *1. Evaluate judgments made by others.*

Teachable moments can come from government rulings that are personally relevant to your students. If students feel it was unfair that the city council chose the vacant lot for parking instead of a skateboard park, they can evaluate the records of discussions that took place and make judgments about what information was valid and what decisions were unjust.

These types of analyses are particularly engaging and relevant when students know that they'll have an opportunity to share their impressions and recommendations with the people or committees involved. They can organize a visit to the council, hold a classroom discussion with a council member, or write letters to the editor of the local paper.

## *2. Make thoughtful decisions and learn from authentic consequences.*

Give students decision-making authority for appropriate aspects of class events, field trips, presentations to parents, or party planning and supply purchasing. Provide guidance early, then step back and suggest places where they can look for guidance more independently.

Allow them to experience the authentic consequences of choices they make. This means stepping back when they say their group is ready to present, even through you see that they haven't adequately rehearsed their presentation for the assembly. It means not bringing extra snacks on a field trip when the students have been in charge of planning how to best use the snack funds. If they bought expensive energy bars but could afford only one per student, they'll build judgment to purchase the less expensive bulk trail mix next time, which will last the group all day.

## *3. Judge fairness.*

Students can *evaluate fairness*. For example, is it fair when runners competing in international competitions benefit from living at high altitudes with lower oxygen content? These athletes will usually have higher amounts of hemoglobin in their blood to carry more oxygen, a critical resource in competitions. However, "blood doping" to enhance hemoglobin with transfusions of one's own stored blood is considered an unfair athletic practice.

## Your Trust and Confidence

When you provide guidance, tools, opportunities, and a safe place for students to make thoughtful, relevant decisions, your trust will boost their confidence in making independent choices. These experiences will integrate increased judgment skills into your students' developing brain circuits at a critical time when they are needed more than ever.