



119: How to Help Children Make Decisions

Hi there, it's Emily here. I recorded the episode you're about to hear just seven days ago. And in that time, things have changed drastically in our country as a result of the rapidly evolving situation concerning the effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. From the declaration of a national emergency to all manner of gatherings being canceled or postponed, I thought of postponing this episode and recording a new one in response to, well, everything. The closures, the social distancing, the truly unprecedented way things continue to change in this country and around the world. But then I decided it was okay to keep this episode as planned for a few reasons.

#1. Everything is being postponed or canceled right now. So those things I have control over and can keep as normal, I will. So today's episode will carry on as planned.

#2. I'm a super slow processor if you didn't already know that. Maybe you are, too, so you get it. As the reality of our daily lives shifts, not only daily actually but hourly right now. I'm not sure what to say yet about everything.

#3. The truth is, and you already know this, anything I have to say to response to this historic situation we now all find ourselves in will really just be some version of what I say every week anyway. And that is this. All we can do is the next right thing in love. It was true last year, last week, and is true today. So for the next 14 minutes, let's think about the children in our lives and what we can do to help them do the next right thing. Maybe this is the most relevant episode I could create after all since many of us will be spending a lot more time with children in the days and weeks to come.

Okay, on to today's episode.

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 119. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and as sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment. You're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next rate step. Today's episode is for the parents, the caregivers, or anyone with children in your life who sometimes need a nudge in the right direction. Listen in.

I had a dream that I printed out a manuscript I was working on, and it fell from the printer like soup. So I grabbed a little Japanese bowl to catch it with, and I took a sip without thinking. And then I worried because I wasn't sure which chapter I ate. It was a dream, of course, but I still woke up feeling like I had done something wrong, like I was missing something important, but I didn't know where to go to find it.

A mentor told me once to pay attention to my dreams. It wasn't because every single element in my dreams had some kind of hidden meaning, but the emotion that lingers when we wake up, well, that can be an important source of information. That's the power of our imagination. A thing may not have happened, but that doesn't mean it wasn't real.

On a cross country flight few weeks ago, I watched the movie version of a book that I'd read a few years back. It was *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?* if you must know, but I enjoyed the movie, which is saying something because typically when I watch a movie version of a book I've read, I'm fairly disappointed. This time, though, I found myself watching it and just enjoying it without much judgment. Now, many factors were at play here in my experience. In general, I like movies better on airplanes due to the watching-movie-in-the-clouds factor. That's just cool. And also, it had been years since I read the book, so the details had faded enough that I knew I liked it, but I couldn't tell you exactly what they got wrong or left out in the movie.

Typically with movies that started out as books, well, it's hard to please the readers. The filmmakers have so many limitations with time and money, technology, not to mention their own interpretation of the author's intent. But when we read the book, our imagination is limitless. If the author doesn't give details, we just fill them in ourselves. Our imaginations are powerful.

The only limit to my imagination is that I cannot put myself in your head. I'm stuck inside my own head. I don't know what you're thinking unless you tell me. And even then, I only hear it through the filter of my own experience. Well, that's true between you and me, and it's true between us and our children.

So when my daughter in elementary school, and she told me she was afraid of what her friends would think of her new haircut, I dismissed her imagination too soon. "Oh my gosh, they're going to love it," I said. They probably would. That's true. But they may not love it. So what then? The picture that she was holding onto in her mind wasn't necessarily an unreasonable one. She was lost in her own imaginary world, seeing her friends laughing and pointing and offering only heavy rejection. In her head, it hurt even though it hadn't happened yet, even though it probably wouldn't happen at all. But I'm no help to her when I say, "That won't happen. Don't worry about it."

I'm learning to practice expanding my own imaginary world to include the imagination of my children. I started to learn this back when they were a little bit younger, but I'm finding it still applies even as they grow.

The goal is to enter into that painful place with her, to walk alongside her into the dark alley of her mind, to confront the fear lurking in pretend corners, and not to tell her there's nothing to fear but to give her the tools to handle what might come next. This is an important practice in all aspects of parenting, but especially when it comes to helping our kids make decisions.

The next time your child comes to you with a particular fear or maybe a potential uncomfortable outcome or maybe needing help and making a decision, rather than launching immediately into lecture, fix or tell mode, here are four things you can do instead to help your child begin to develop their own habit of soulful decision-making.

#1. Ask at least two questions.

I've come to believe more and more that listening is the opposite of loneliness, or at least being listened to. Imagine if someone was willing to listen to you in your lonely places, and really hear you out. You may not feel so lonely anymore. Part of the fear of negative outcomes our kids have is they're afraid of the burden of being alone in the rejection, alone in that new adventure, or alone in their decision making.

If your child is stuck in fear or doesn't know what to do next, pause and ask a question. Not a leading question, or a statement disguised as a question. You know what I'm talking about. But a true curious question that seeks to know and understand.

Episode 94 of *The Next Right Thing* is all about the importance of asking the second question, and with children, it's equally as important. I know where the parents and sometimes it seems like we're supposed to have all the answers, and so our first instinct is not to ask but to tell. But, instead, if your child is struggling with a fear of frustration or a decision, before you tell them anything, try asking them a question and then challenge yourself to ask at least one more question. Look for the clues to her hesitation. Find out the images she's holding onto. Follow the trail to her heart.

#2. Kneel to understand their world before asking them to rise to understand yours.

Years ago, I read a book by Wess Stafford that forever changed how I see children. The book is called *Too Small to Ignore*, and in it, Wess says this, he writes, "So far as we see in reading the gospels, Jesus never admonished children to become more grown up. He did, however, exhort grownups to become more like children."

This begs the question, what does it mean to be like little children? The best way to know is to ask the children themselves. What imaginary outcomes might they be anticipating? What is he afraid will happen? What sounds fun? What sounds scary? What clues will she offer you about the shape of her soul?

#3. Offer next right thing solutions.

If your son needs to decide between taking an art class or taking a music class in third grade, keep the third-grade perspective. What matters in third grade? Learning, yes, but also friends, predictability, safety, curiosity, fun. Resist the urge to insist a third-grade decision have high school consequences. Let it be a third-grade decision. But at the same time, when offering a next right thing, solution, keep in mind that third grade is the oldest your child has ever been. In fact, no matter the age of your child, the age he where she is now is their oldest one. No matter if she's three, or 10, or 16, that's why they always feel like they're so grown up. It's because they are in their own minds. To her, this is the biggest and potentially most consequential decision she's yet had to make. So resist the urge to downplay it just because it's only third grade after all.

As the parents, we get to shape these moments for our kids. We get to help shape them anyway, both by respecting them for what they are and by not making them something they're not. And if a child has no

idea what she wants to do, maybe take what you've learned, and ask her what is just the next right thing she can do today. It might have nothing to do with the decision. It might be go for a bike ride or eat a snack. Do her homework or play in her room. Keep her in the moment as much as you can and do your best to stay there with her.

#4. Remember your job.

There's a difference between God's job and our job. In his book *Families Where Grace is in Place*, Jeff Vanvonderen says, "God's job is to fix and to change. Our job is to depend, serve and equip. This is the work of grace and it is more restful than you can imagine."

Speaking for myself now, I wonder what would happen if in our family, we would dare to parent from a place of love rather than from a place of fear. I do know a little bit about what it could look like. I want to know even more, and so I need God in all of this. Not just to do the parts that I'm not good at, not just to pick me up when I begin to feel weak, but I need the kind of God who takes up residence inside me to parent with me, in me, as me, as I trust him. Good thing that's the kind of God he is.

So that haircut conversation might sound to my grownup mind, small and unimportant, but when you're in third grade, that is your whole world. And actually, now that I think about it, I've had some pretty important haircut conversations in my adult world too.

I want to be willing to walk into the imagination of my child and face her biggest fears with her, and I know our friend Jesus is willing to walk into my imagination with me and face my fears with me, too. He doesn't dismiss me and say, "That's never going to happen." He says he will be with me even if it does happen. The town in my head has beautiful potential, but it also has long, dark alleyways of fear and uncertainty. I don't want to live in that town, but I also can't ignore it. God wants to give me a holy imagination to restore the twisted thoughts into straight lines again, to reclaim the corrupt government that rules in my head, to recover the barren wasteland of my battered emotion, to repossess the rundown streets I have forgotten to enjoy.

In him, all things hold together. In him, the town I have crafted in my head can be redeemed. If God did not value the power of our imaginations, how could he ask us to believe in a God we cannot see? How could Noah build an ark when there had never been rain? How could Moses lead the people toward a land he'd never visited? How could Mary believe the baby savior would come from her virgin body? What was she treasuring up in her heart if not the image of the not yet born God born first in the heart of her imagination?

I'm learning slow, the power of inviting God into my imagination, and I want to be a parent who enters into the imagination of my kids. In turn, as we continue to learn together what it means to simply do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 119 of *The Next Right Thing*.

I hope this invitation to help your child make decisions can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow because it's true. This is a podcast about making

decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives. As always. You can find me @emilypfreeman on Instagram or at emilypfreeman.com where you can click on podcast at the top of the page and grab a transcript for this or any other episode.

And if you want to help even more people find the podcast, it really does help when you leave a review in Apple podcasts. Here's a recent one from listener Yvette Hardy who writes, "If you're new to podcasts or if you're a seasoned podcast listener, this is one you need to subscribe to. It is concise, to the point, and I'm actually surprised at how much wisdom Emily packs into super short episodes every time, and have I mentioned her voice? It's so calming."

Well, thanks Yvette. If this podcast is for you, I'd love it if you left a review, and extra exciting is if you would share the episode with your friends. So thanks so much for being great.

In closing, parenting is hard, isn't it? I don't think we'll ever feel like we know what we're doing, but it's good to talk about it, right? So I'll leave you with these words from the gospel of Mark 10:15-16, in The Message version, "The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off, but Jesus was irate and let them know it. Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this, unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in. Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them."

This is the word of the Lord. It's absolutely true and given to us in love. Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.