

## Making Good Choices (A Post For My Students)



Let's talk about choices, shall we?

Teachers love framing everything in terms of “making good choices” and “that’s your choice.” Why do you have a ‘D’? Well, you *chose* not to turn in work. Why are you in lunch detention? You made some poor *choices* about your behavior in class.

We even tell students that they can do anything they set their mind to – be anything they wish to be – if they set their mind on it and refuse to give up. That, of course, is a really big, extended expression of choice.

If we're being completely honest, we sometimes overdo it. When our rhetoric ignores your reality, we breed cynicism, not inspiration. That's why I wanted to touch base with you today, if you don't mind, and talk plainly about making good choices. And I'll try to keep it brief.

I may not be perfect, dear child, but I am old and wise. Somewhat old – but ridiculously wise. The best wise. You won't believe my wiseness. It's the wisest.

And while I may not always be right, I believe in being as honest as I know how to be with people. And, as a teenager, you're almost “people.” Close enough, anyway.

So here's the skinny:

There are no guarantees.

You might make all the best choices and everything goes to crap repeatedly no matter what you do. Conversely, you're going to encounter people who do every stupid thing possible and never take any responsibility for their lives, and everything just keeps coming up unicorns and rainbows for them. It's not a mathematical formula or a carefully structured science lab – it's life, and life is messy and unpredictable.

But here's what I can promise you – if you make “good choices” often enough, you will *dramatically improve your odds*. All that stuff we say so often you're sick of it? Stay in school, work hard, don't do drugs, don't get pregnant, choose the right friends, don't be a jerk to people – all of that matters more than you'd think. There are no guarantees, but if there were hundreds of copies of you, all trying different approaches, the ones who made the most “good choices” and “worked the hardest” would largely outshine those who simply coasted, and blow away those who chose the truly stupid things – especially if they did them over and over.

But there aren't hundreds of you, unfortunately, so all you can do is play the probabilities.

You already know that school can be stupid. It's not meant to be; most of your teachers really did sign up because they love the subject they teach and they want to share that passion and help kids be successful and all that. We genuinely hope, every year, that you'll find something engaging or challenging or meaningful in the stuff we make you do – we really do.

But it's an imperfect system, and we're imperfect people, and in the end, your entire year – academically, behaviorally, emotionally, logically, or sometimes randomly, comes down to a set of numbers between 1-100 and letters between A-F, skipping ‘E’ because THAT doesn't mean anything, whereas ‘B’ apparently conveys a WEALTH of information about you as a student and as a person.

I understand your cynicism in this case. But guess what those numbers and letters give you, if you choose to do what you can to keep them high? They give you more *choices*. You want to stay in town and do junior college? That's great – when it's your choice. You want to take a year off and work before deciding? OK – if that's by choice. Good numbers and letters increase your choices – more colleges, more professions, more scholarships, more activities – and while “making good choices” can feel like a real burden sometimes, “having lots of choices” is *much* better than not.

So yeah – I'm going to push you to think a bit more, and to stay organized, and to behave. I'm going to beg you to stay in school, stay off drugs, keep your pants zipped and don't experiment with anything harder than Double Stuff Oreos once in a while. I want you to increase your options when it matters most.

Now, here's the part we *really* try to avoid talking about, especially when we're in our Idealism Zone...

All those good choices and hard work might not create the same chances for everyone. I am convinced to the core of my being that they increase your odds, no matter *who* you are, but I can't promise they increase everyone's odds equally, or even in the same way.



If you're a girl, there will likely be extra challenges to get where you want to go, depending on exactly where that is. Things are by most measures SO much better than they were a half-century ago, but being a female-type still carries its own challenges – often when you least expect them, honey-bunch.

I believe you can find a way to up your odds nonetheless.

If you're Black, or Hispanic, or Muslim, or Gay, or anything outside of straight, white, tall, and pretty, the system might not cooperate for you as easily as it does Captain Caucasian and his trusty sidekick, Mayo. You may find you're making GREAT choices and working MUCH harder than many around you, but the odds seem to actively push back against you rather than reward you.

I want you to know we're fighting for you – advocating, explaining, sometimes just yelling in incoherent outrage, but always fighting. And I encourage you to speak out in whatever way you find meaningful; I am NOT telling you to just “suck it up” and work a little bit harder.

What I am suggesting is that on the micro level – the most immediate, you-and-things-directly-in-your-control reality – the same basic truth applies. You will increase your odds with smart choices and hard work and reduce them with bad decisions or apathy. I'm not arguing that it's fair – just talking about *choices*.

I mean, it's in the title, so let's not act all shocked, K?

One last thing. And it's potentially uncomfortable. You may have had some awful things happen to you before now. Some of them may be ongoing – a bad situation at home, illness or accidents, could be anything. I want you to know with GREAT conviction that those things are *not on you*. Those things aren't about your choices – good, bad, or otherwise. Period.

When you're 7 or 10 or even 14, we don't let you vote or drive or decide what you'll eat or drink BECAUSE you're not considered emotionally, mentally, or legally responsible enough to make such choices. I don't say that to be demeaning; I say it because it's *not on you* that your parents got a divorce, or that your dad is so

angry all the time, or that you're living in your car. It's *not on you* that you were abused or neglected or born with something "wrong" with you.

You're just now getting the "choices" speech because you're just now entering a time in your life that you're kinda starting to become responsible for *some* of decisions you make, and the paths you choose to follow. That other stuff might make everything harder, and some of it may even require some tough choices from you down the road, but they're from *other people's choices*. What they chose impacts you; what you choose will impact others.

Again – it's not about "fair," it's just how things work.

Maybe you've already made some pretty bad choices – stuff that is on you. The guy who shared too much with. The pictures you took. The drugs you tried. The classes you flunked. The teacher you threatened. Yeah, that stuff is a problem. It can impact your odds and may limit your current and future choices.

But you'll notice how rarely, even in teacher rhetoric, we talk about making one, solitary, big CHOICE. This post isn't called "Make A Good Choice." Your grades, your disciplinary record, your relationships – they're almost never the result of a single poor choice, or a single glorious decision. The thing about choices is that they have to be made every day, over and over.

That sort of sucks because it means that for the rest of your life going to be faced with decisions about how you use your time, where you apply your resources, and how you shape your odds. On the other hand, it means that every day – heck, every hour – is a chance to make different choices. Better choices.

Don't get too Disney about that last part. The choices you made yesterday and last week are forever set in time. There's no such thing as a completely "fresh start." There are consequences, good and bad, short-term and long.

Or maybe not. There are no guarantees either way (as I believe we've already covered) – just ways to change your odds. Ways to impact how many choices will be available to you down the road.

So make the best ones you can. Work at them; be stubborn when you're on the right path. You can still enjoy life along the way – we want you to be happy and successful; you're not being bred for the throne in time of war.

Finally, please know that if you weren't already pretty amazing – so rich in natural gifts, walking them out with such style – we wouldn't even be having this conversation. With great power, dear, comes great responsibility. And you have more power than you realize.

So make good choices, please. I'm rooting for you.

