

Life Decisions & Tradeoffs

Evaluating Adult Choices with Competing Priorities

Subjects: Psychology, Civics, Life Skills, Sociology

Grade Levels: 10–12 (adaptable for college intro courses)

Time: 45–60 minutes

Group Size: Small groups (3–4) or individual reflection

Materials: Case sheets, writing materials

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students analyze realistic adult decision-making scenarios involving **relationships, careers, location, and family responsibilities**. Each situation presents **competing values** where no option is clearly correct. Students evaluate possible choices, consider consequences, and reflect on how priorities and life stage influence decisions.

The goal is to help students understand that **adult decisions often involve tradeoffs, uncertainty, and long-term consequences** rather than clear right or wrong answers.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify competing priorities within complex life decisions
 - Evaluate short- and long-term consequences of different choices
 - Explain how values, goals, and responsibilities influence decisions
 - Practice respectful discussion and ethical reasoning
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Key Concept (Student-Friendly)

Many important life decisions involve choosing **between two good options or two difficult options**. These are not “easy” decisions because something meaningful is gained and something meaningful is lost regardless of the choice.

Student Instructions

For each situation:

1. Identify the **main decision** being faced.
2. List at least **two realistic options**.
3. Explain the **benefits and drawbacks** of each option.
4. Decide which option you would choose and **why**.
5. Be prepared to explain your reasoning to the group.

There are **no correct answers**—your grade is based on reasoning, not the choice itself.

Adult Decision-Making Scenarios

Scenario 1: Education vs. Relationship

You have met the person you are confident you want to spend your life with. Both of you have high career goals and have been accepted to schools in different parts of the country. A long-distance relationship may be difficult, and neither school offers the program the other person needs.

Decision to Evaluate:

How do you balance personal relationships with long-term educational and career goals?

Scenario 2: Job Satisfaction vs. Financial Security

You currently have a job you truly enjoy, but it pays very little. You are offered a much higher-paying position that requires relocation and working in a field you are unsure you will enjoy.

Decision to Evaluate:

How do you weigh happiness and job satisfaction against income and financial stability?

Scenario 3: Location vs. Career Opportunities

You have always wanted to live in a particular part of the country, but there are no job opportunities in your field there. You can either change careers or move elsewhere. Your family has strong roots in your current community.

Decision to Evaluate:

How do personal dreams, career flexibility, and family stability influence life choices?

Scenario 4: Family Needs vs. Individual Stability

You have three children. Your oldest is a high school senior. Your employer requires you to relocate immediately. Your spouse must move with you, but your senior does not want to change schools for their final year. There are no nearby relatives who can take them in.

Decision to Evaluate:

How do parents balance the needs of one child against the needs of the entire family?

Student Response Organizer (Optional Handout)

Scenario #: _____

Decision Being Faced:

Option 1:

- Benefits:
- Drawbacks:

Option 2:

- Benefits:
- Drawbacks:

My Choice:

Reasoning:

Small Group Discussion (Optional)

After completing at least two scenarios, students discuss:

1. Did different group members choose different options? Why?
 2. Which values mattered most (family, money, happiness, stability, goals)?
 3. How might the “best” decision change depending on age or life stage?
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Teacher Facilitation Guide (Answer Key Style)

Look for student reasoning that:

- Acknowledges tradeoffs rather than pretending one option is perfect
- Considers both short-term and long-term consequences
- Recognizes the emotional impact of decisions
- Demonstrates empathy for multiple people affected

Key Teaching Point:

A well-reasoned decision is not defined by the outcome but by the **quality of the thinking behind it.**

Optional Reflection Assignment

Option A: Personal Reflection

Choose one scenario and explain how your values influenced your decision. Would your choice change if you were older or had children? Why or why not?

Option B: Comparative Analysis

Compare two scenarios and explain how different responsibilities (relationships, children, finances) change decision-making priorities.