

GUIDE: Voice & Choice

# Confident & Capable: Strengthening Your Young Person's Voice & Agency

Helping young people develop a strong sense of agency — the belief that they have control over their choices and actions — is a strong protective factor for their mental, emotional, and academic well-being.



When families focus on what's within their control, they can strengthen decision-making, self-advocacy, and resilience in the face of life's challenges.

**This guide offers practical tools to support your young person in building confidence, setting healthy boundaries, and developing the skills to lead their own lives with purpose and self-reliance. Modeling these habits as a parent or caregiver shows that you and your child can take meaningful action, even in uncertain and challenging times.**

## Three strategies to strengthen your young person's voice, self-advocacy, and sense of agency

### 1. Encourage voice and choice

Create regular opportunities for your young person to express their preferences, ideas, and feelings, whether it's choosing a family activity, weighing in on school decisions, or setting personal goals.

- **Self-agency:** They take ownership of their choices and recognize that their actions impact outcomes, such as choosing how to spend their time or which activities to pursue.
- **Self-advocacy:** They learn to express their needs, desires, and values confidently in conversations with adults and peers.
- **Decision making:** They practice evaluating options and making choices based on what matters to them, even in low-stakes situations such as picking between two school projects or activities.

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### 2. Model assertive communication

Demonstrate ways to express needs, boundaries, and opinions clearly and respectfully. Invite them to practice, too. Use role-playing or real-life situations to guide them through saying things like, “I need help with...” or “I feel uncomfortable when...”

- **Self-agency:** They understand ways to take initiative in relationships. They learn to set healthy boundaries. Reinforce that they can exercise control in their interactions.
- **Self-advocacy:** They develop the language and confidence to speak up for themselves in school, at home, or in social settings.
- **Decision making:** They learn to decide what boundaries to set, what support they need, and how best to communicate them.



### 3. Support problem-solving, don't solve for them

When challenges arise, help your young person think through solution rather than jumping in to fix things. Ask open-ended questions such as, “What do you think your options are?”

- **Self-agency:** They take initiative and are accountable in creating solutions and follow-ups.
- **Self-advocacy:** They identify when they need help or support and learn how to articulate those needs effectively, such as asking for accommodations or clarification.
- **Decision making:** They gain experience weighing pros and cons, considering consequences, and making informed, thoughtful choices.



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## Focus on the internal locus of control

Teaching your young person to develop an internal locus of control helps to prevent hopelessness and burnout. This approach supports your young person as they overcome challenges. As they practice this strategy, challenges become more manageable. They are more likely to make more effort, persist, find emotional stability, and lower their risk of depression and anxiety.

**Try these examples to discuss a challenging experience.** Consider where you might be able to support them to develop an internal locus of control.

### Inside your locus of control

*Things you can influence or change*

- Your thoughts and beliefs about yourself
- Your attitude and mindset
- How you respond rather than react to a situation
- How you communicate your feelings or needs
- How you take care of your mental and physical health
- Who you ask for support (friends, family, mentors, therapists)
- Whether you seek solutions or alternative options
- Your willingness to grow or learn from an experience

### Outside your locus of control

*Things you can't change or control*

- Other people's opinions, feelings, or actions
- Whether someone forgives or understands you
- The weather, global events, or emergencies
- What others say behind your back
- The pace of someone else's healing or growth
- Unfair decisions or systems outside your reach
- How long it takes someone else to respond

### Learn More: [Voice & Choice Mini Workbook](#)

Explore ways to focus on what's in your control as you strengthen skills and confidence. This workbook is part of **Built to Thrive**, an interactive workbook created by The Steve Fund. [Explore Built to Thrive now!](#)

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