



When you choose the action, you choose the consequences

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Generally speaking, countries have laws around when people are considered to be adults. This could be eighteen years of age. Or it may be twenty-one. And the reason is because until you reach a certain age and a certain level of development you cannot be entirely responsible for all your actions. In order to be responsible for your actions you need to have a certain amount of life experience, you need to have received some guidance on how to do life, and your brain needs to have reached a stage of development where you are able to understand that actions have consequences, know what the consequences of actions are, and be prepared to take actions that don't harm other people or their property or in any way break the law. Although adulthood is often defined by age, most of us do understand an adult as someone who can behave responsibly and understand and take accountability for what they do. This is why in instances of serious mental illness or mental incompetence adults are placed under guardianship. To operate as a free and independent adult, to live in the world and take your place, to achieve your goals and dreams, you need to understand that actions have consequences. And when you choose the actions, you choose the consequences.

One of the most highly developed (from an evolutionary point of view) parts of the brain is the prefrontal cortex. This is right at the front of the brain, behind the forehead. This is the part of the brain responsible for what we call "executive functioning" and allows us to think about our thinking. It is also the part of the brain that allows us to think about our decisions and understand the repercussions of our decisions. It enables us to understand and adapt our behaviour appropriately to social situations. It enables us to predict possible consequences of our actions before we take them. The prefrontal cortex takes a long time to develop. In humans the prefrontal cortex is only fully developed at around the age of twenty-five. And thus the functions of the prefrontal cortex - managing thinking, emotions and behaviour, planning, decision making, problem-solving, focusing, and adjusting to new situations are generally (I say generally because there are always exceptions and some people live a life that forces them to develop capabilities ahead of time) not well developed in teenagers or adults in their early twenties. And even in your late twenties when people think you should be acting like a mature adult, your prefrontal cortex

may be poor at these functions because your environment and learning experiences, and possibly even your biology, have contributed to suboptimal development of this part of the brain.

Mature adults, with a well-functioning prefrontal cortex understand that you cannot separate a decision from its consequences. And understand that not making a decision is in fact making a decision. Inaction also has consequences. If you are not under guardianship (and you can now see why having a guardian is a legal requirement for some adults who do not have the capacity to act on their own), you will want to be free to live your life in the most fulfilling way. And that means you need to be very well aware of the principle that when you choose the action, you choose the consequences. In the same way that wrong or stupid actions can lead to terrible consequences, well thought through actions can lead to very desirable consequences. When we talk about the term, “when you choose the actions you choose the consequences”, it is often referred to in a negative sense, however, it applies equally well in a positive sense. If you want certain outcomes in your life (money, good relationships, great career, happiness, safety), then you also know what decisions and actions to take to get you what you want in your life. Not only do you know what not to do, you also know what you must do in order to create the life you want to live.

If you don't have a great track record in getting the consequences you want, or you feel you don't make good decisions you can always learn to do better. In the absence of major brain pathology and structural damage, your brain is capable of learning at all ages. And if you are not good at making the right decisions or taking the right actions, you can learn to be better at it. The brain is capable of a lot of change, even if you are well into adulthood. And the brain typically learns through practice and rehearsal. So, the more you practice thinking a certain way the better you usually get at it.

Although the prefrontal cortex is only finished developing in the middle twenties, you can still develop functions associated with it long before then. You don't have to, and in fact you shouldn't wait until someone is 25 to teach them that actions have consequences. Older children can start learning, and you do in fact want to teach them that actions have consequences in an age-appropriate way. Age-appropriate means don't ask children to be responsible for actions or outcomes they cannot possibly be responsible for. That will just instill fear or low-self-esteem in them. Not doing something because you fear the outcome is different to not doing something because you understand why the action would be a bad idea. When children are at an age where they can reason and see the link between actions and consequences, helping them learn this will help them grow in confidence as well as success in life.

It is not only children who can learn this. If someone was neglected as a child or who perhaps had parents who themselves never considered the consequences of their actions, then you can certainly get better at this life skill even as an adult. Parents and other adults can help by discussing their own decision making and actions and talking through with their children what possible consequences could result. If children have to make decisions or take actions, then parents can talk through different possible outcomes with their children, including the benefits and negatives of the

outcomes. If you are an adult who needs some work in this area, then use the same methods. Talk through actions and decisions and possible consequences for past as well as present and future actions and decisions. The brain tends to work on “use it or lose it”. So, every time you engage your brain in activities it gets better at those activities. And if you practice getting people to think about the consequences of their actions, they will get better at it.

If you look around you, and even look at your own life, you will notice that you are probably most happy in the life areas you take responsibility for. And responsibility means we have considered all the possible consequences of various actions, understood the outcomes that can occur, know what outcomes we want, and chosen actions to get us the outcomes we want. You need to do this if you want to end up living your best possible life.