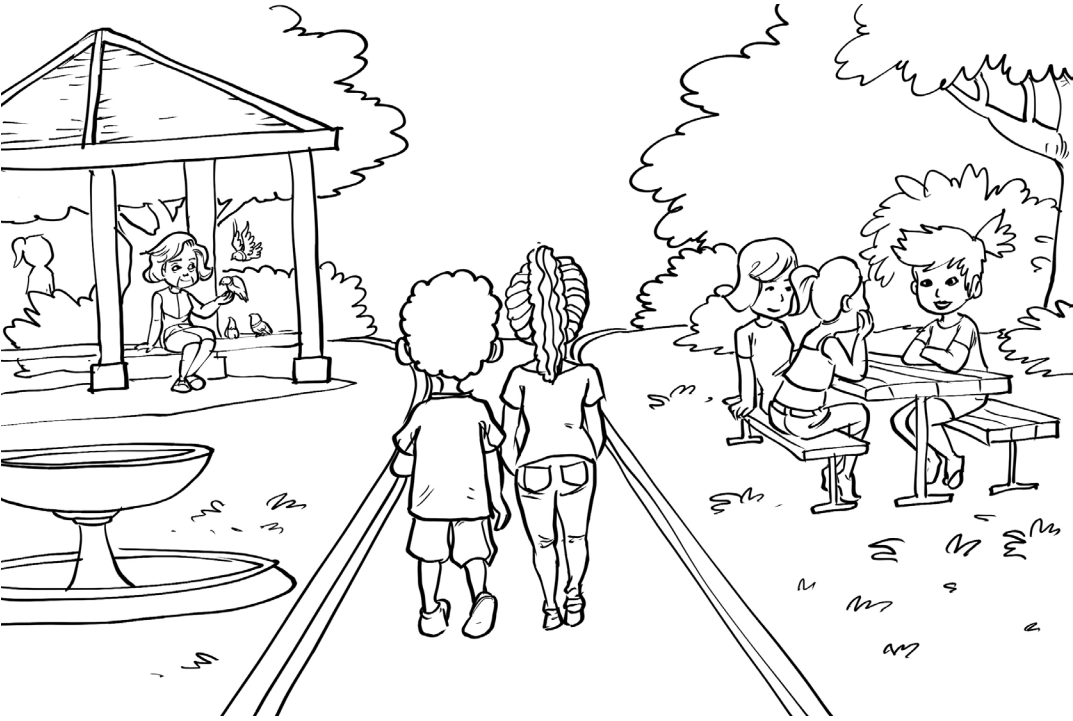


# Make **SMART** Choices with **TYLER** and Friends



Teri Mahaney, PhD

dedicated to all the youth  
making choices today  
that will create their tomorrows



# #1

## I Meet Savra at the Park



"Move it, Tyler. It's bad enough Mom makes me walk you home, without having you drag along. I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, sorry. I was thinking about something that happened in my math class today..."

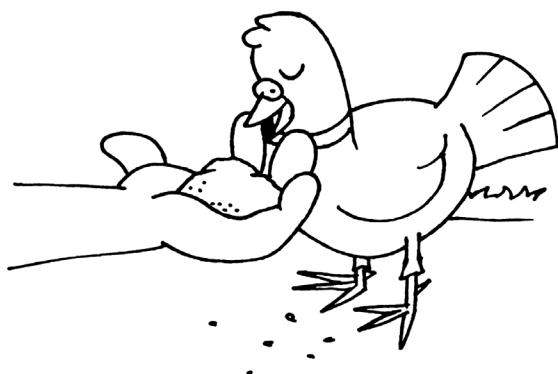
"Well walk faster while you think. Besides, it's Friday, and I don't want to hear about school until Monday."

We were close to home, walking past the grocery store and around the round-about with the fountain without water. Just walk across the park, and half way down the street, and we'd be home. Then I could text Saul and see if he could hang out, and I could ask him about the math class thing.

I could see some of Tanisha's friends hanging out at the picnic table, and she started walking toward them. Of course, I had to go with her. Mom says I'm old enough to take care of myself, and she's not worried about what I do, but she worries about what others

might do. So I have to walk home with Tanisha - until I get to our street where the kids hang out and their parents watch us.

About halfway to the picnic table, I saw some pigeons fluttering around the gazebo across the park. I hardly ever saw pigeons like that, and then just a few. As we got closer, I saw there was a white-haired lady sitting on the bench feeding them. It looked like Saul's Grandmother. The pigeons were all around her feet, and she was talking to them. And then I saw one was eating out of her hand. Wow, I thought, that's pretty cool.



I was totally watching those pigeons as I walked along behind Tanisha. And I really wanted to go over and see them. So much better than having to listen to her and her friends talk about clothes and boys. BO-RING.

I was almost afraid to ask, but I wanted to feed those pigeons. So I used my "I don't care one way or the other" voice, and said, "Hey Tanisha. I think I'll go over and say 'hi' to Saul's Grandmother." And I held my breath, waiting for her answer.

When she didn't answer right away, I said "Just over there, at the gazebo."

She looked toward the gazebo with the squint eyes she uses when she's not wearing her glasses. Then she looked at me and answered in a nice way, "OK, Tyler, go ahead. I can watch you from here."

Wow, she must have taken a chill pill while we walked across the park, I thought.



I took off for the gazebo before she could change her mind.

When I got there, the woman smiled and said, "Hi, Tyler. I'm Savra, Saul's grandmother. I met you at one of the track meets."

"Yeah, I remember," I mumbled.

"Do you want to help me feed the pigeons? There are a lot of them, and I could use some help."

"Well, if you need me to, I guess so."

She kept smiling and held out a bag that said Pigeon Feed on it.



How cool that there's pigeon feed. I reached into the bag and pulled out a handful of brown chips.

"What are these?"

"Pigeon food pellets," she answered.

"So they like this as much as popcorn?"

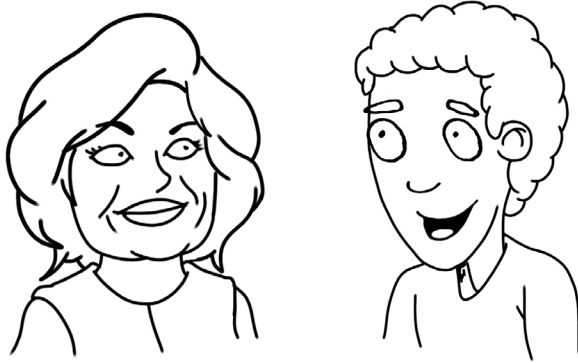
"Definitely. It's a special food for them, and the pellets have all the nutrients they need."

I liked her voice. It sounded like my coach's voice when she told me to pick up my pace in track. It was like a voice you had to listen to and do what it said, but it was still a voice that sounded nice, and like it was doing something good for you.

"I'll bet something worrisome happened at school today," she said.

That kind of stopped me, because I had never heard the word "worrisome" before.

"It usually does," she said. "I know when I was your age, something worrisome happened to me at school nearly every day."



I couldn't imagine her my age. Her hair was all white, though it was a pretty white. She looked healthy; she was wearing running clothes - and earrings. Mom only wears earrings to work.

"Did you want some help with your problem from school? That's what I do. I help people solve their problems and make better choices."

I was getting nervous about all this, so I joked, "Oh, do you have a magic wand or something?"





She laughed, and I liked her laugh. It was a contagious laugh. And it made me laugh. And we were both laughing.

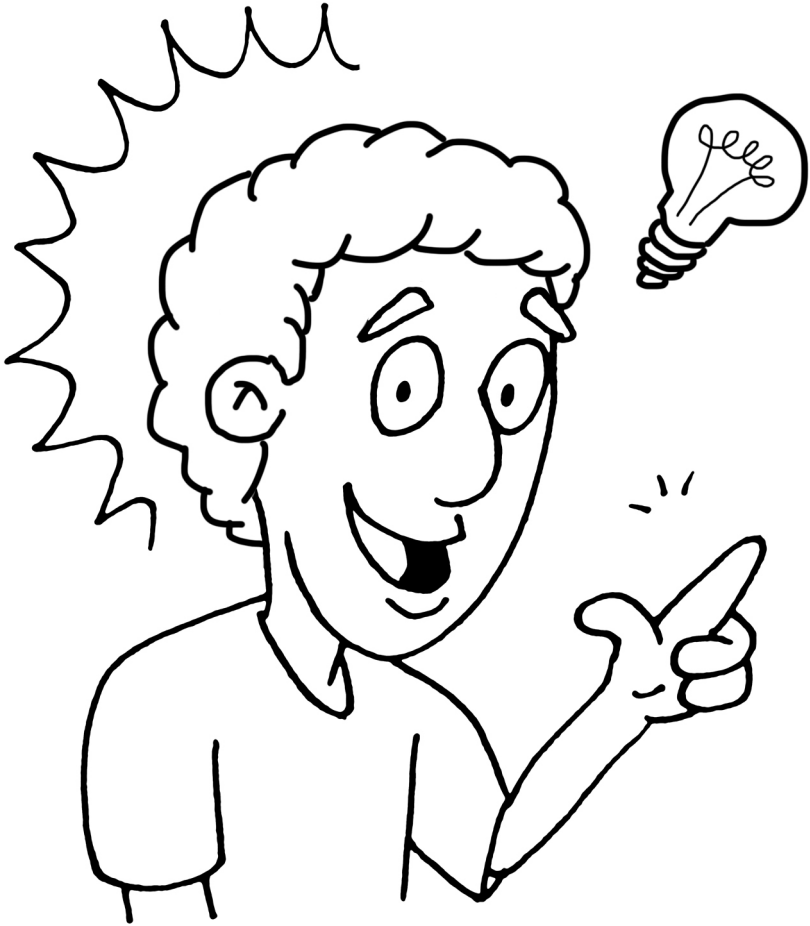
“It’s better than a magic wand, because you can share it with others, and they can use it too.”

I looked around the park, and none of my friends were around. I looked down my street, and the kids weren’t out. Well, I thought, nobody will ever know about this. Why not?

So I said, “OK, if you want to.”

She smiled even bigger, and made room for me on the bench.





## #2

# I See My Problem Clearly



"SMART Choices," she said. "That's the key. You'll have problems all your life. And you'll have to make choices about them. So the better your choices, the better your life will be."

That sounded pretty deep to me. I reached in the bag for another handful of pigeon feed, while I thought about it. She just smiled and waited. It was nice how she waited, without hurrying me or making me feel like I was going too slow.

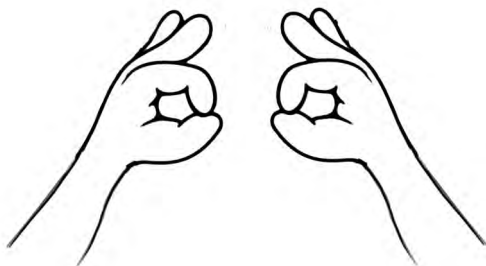
"OK, so how do I make SMART Choices?"

"Do you know what an acronym is?" she asked.

My brain lit up. "Yeah, I do. I learned that in English. It's when a word or abbreviation is made up of the first letters in other words. We use them texting all the time. Like JAS is just a second. WAYN is where are you now? OTW is on the way. LMBO is laughing my, uh, er, backside off. Like that."

"Good," she said, "because SMART is an acronym. We'll go over the letters one at a time, starting with the S. The S stands for 'SEE It.'"

Then she got weird on me. She made a little circle with each hand and put the circles around her eyes like goggles. She looked like an owl cartoon. And she laughed.



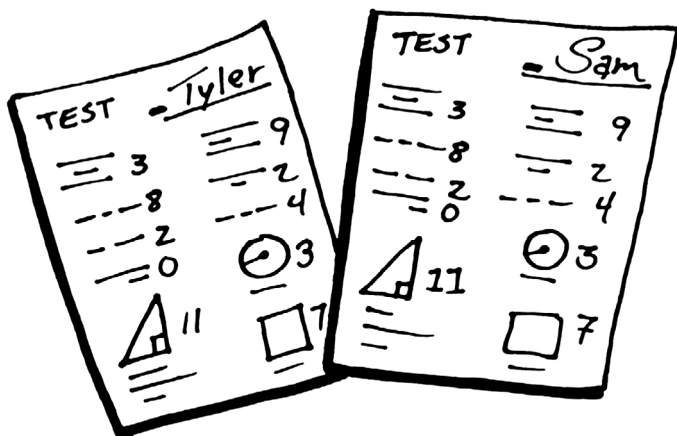
So I didn't feel bad I was laughing too. It was totally funny looking.

"Whenever I do this, it means you're going to SEE your problem clearly, and then you can state it clearly. How you state your problem is how you define it. OK?"

"OK," I answered, though I didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

"Great. Let's get started. Tell me about your problem at school today."

I wasn't sure I wanted to tell her. She sat there, calmly feeding the pigeons. And after a long silence, I blurted out, "We had a big math test today, and my friend, Sam, asked to copy my answers."



She nodded and was quiet for awhile. Not like Mom who would have jumped all over me by now.

"And what did you do?"

I wondered if she had heard me. I told her Sam asked to copy my answers.

"Well, I let her copy them." I mumbled, while I threw some pellets to the pigeons.

"Oh, Sam's a girl," she said, and she threw some pellets to the pigeons. "Is she a special friend?"

My face get hot, and I threw some more pellets to the pigeons.

"Well, sort of, I guess, I mean not really, but she's a friend, that's all."

She smiled bigger, and nodded, and fed the pigeons.

"So why is this a problem?"

"What do you mean, why is it a problem?"

Savra put her goggle hands up to her eyes and said, "S. S is SEE your problem clearly. How do you SEE this as a problem for yourself? To answer that, you ask yourself, 'So What? So what if I let Sam copy my math test?'"

"It's a problem because Mr. Ravi is going to figure it out because Sam copied EVERY answer and our scores will be EXACTLY the same and Sam NEVER gets high scores in Math like I do and he'll tell my Mom and Mom told me if she ever caught me cheating I'd be TOAST," I almost shouted.

And I had one of my space out mental flashes.

FLASH!

MOM BECOMES A FIRE BREATHING DRAGON -  
FLAMING ME INTO A PIECE OF CHARRED TOAST.



"I understand now. You cheated, and your teacher, Mr. Ravi, is going to figure it out, and he'll tell your mother, who is going to turn you into burnt toast. Is that right?"

"Well, yeah. I exaggerated a little about the toast part. But Mom'll be off the charts mad."

"So why did you do it?"

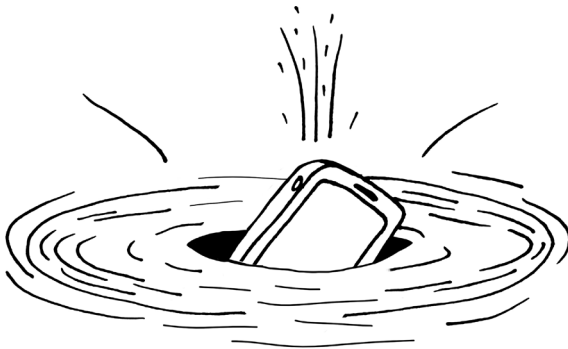
"Because Sam really needed me to help her. She has to get a good grade on this test to get a C in the class, and her Dad said if she gets anything lower than a C, she'll be grounded and lose her cell."

"And why is that your problem? Why is that important to you?"

"Because she's my best friend. We text all the time."

FLASH!

SAM DOESN'T HAVE HER CELL. MY TEXTS WANDER  
IN CYBER-SPACE - AND GO INTO A BLACK HOLE. I GET A  
BLACK HOLE IN MY STOMACH.





"So it sounds like you have two problems. One problem is that you cheated on your math test, and you don't want your Mom to find out. And another problem is that you didn't say no to a friend who asked you to do something you knew you weren't supposed to do. Does that feel right? Think about it and let me know."

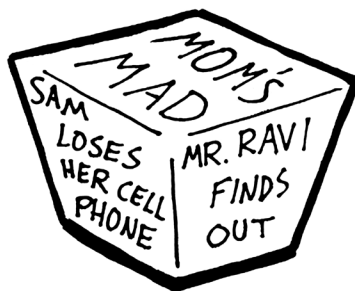
And we both sat and fed the pigeons. I watched a pigeon eat out of her hand. And I stuck my hand out, but no pigeon came to me.

"Well, I guess so, when you have me SEE it like that."

"This is the first step in making a SMART Choice, Tyler. And it's the most important step. You have to SEE your problem clearly before you start solving it. It doesn't help if you solve the wrong problem, no matter how smart your solution is."

"Like what would the wrong problem be?" I said.

"Let's say you defined your problem as making sure Mr. Ravi doesn't find out Sam copied your answers. You would be trying to solve the wrong problem."



"I get it. I define my problem as Mom not finding out."

"That's not the real problem either. Try again," Savra said.

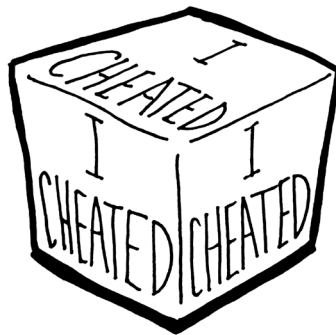
"Is it that Sam might lose her cell phone?"

"That's not the real problem either." Savra said.

It was starting to feel like I was taking one of those standardized tests that never ends.

"So it must be that I could get in trouble," I said. "And that's my last guess."

"You're closer, but you still haven't defined the real problem - the cause of all of these other problems. The real problem is you cheated. That's the action that created the consequences you're worried about. Because you cheated, the other things could happen."



"OK. I cheated. But what about my mom finding out?"

That's part of the Measures - the M in the SMART acronym. Are you ready to move on to M?"

If being ready to move on is feeling like you want to run away to another life, then I was ready.

"Yeah. OK. but what do I have to do now?"

