

Supporting Young People Through Big Feelings

A guide for carers reading Dylan's Big Decisions

Dylan's Big Decisions explores something many young people experience but rarely talk about — feeling torn between people, responsibilities, and emotions.

For Dylan, choosing between an important football commitment and visiting his mum in prison brings up complicated feelings. He cares about both things deeply, and that makes the decision feel overwhelming.

This story helps young people understand that mixed emotions are normal and that difficult choices don't always have a perfect answer.

Children in care often carry loyalty, grief, love, anger, and a sense of responsibility all at once. This guide offers ideas to help carers support those conversations.

Why This Story Matters

Young people who have experienced family disruption, parental incarceration, or separation often feel responsible for things that are outside their control.

When they face decisions involving family, relationships, or expectations, they may feel:

- Torn between two people or places
- Guilty no matter what they choose
- Worried about disappointing someone
- Angry about the situation
- Confused about what the "right" decision is

These feelings are not a sign that a child is difficult or manipulative. They are signs that the young person cares deeply and may be carrying more emotional weight than they can manage alone.

Stories can help children recognise these emotions and realise they are not alone.

Reading the Book Together

You don't need to turn the book into a lesson. The most helpful thing is simply reading together and staying curious. Young people may not always want to talk straight away. That's okay.

Often the conversation happens later, when they feel safe enough to share.

Try to:

- Read slowly and allow pauses
- Notice emotional moments in the story
- Stay calm if strong feelings come up
- Let the child guide how much they want to talk

Sometimes listening is more important than asking questions.

Gentle Questions to Ask While Reading

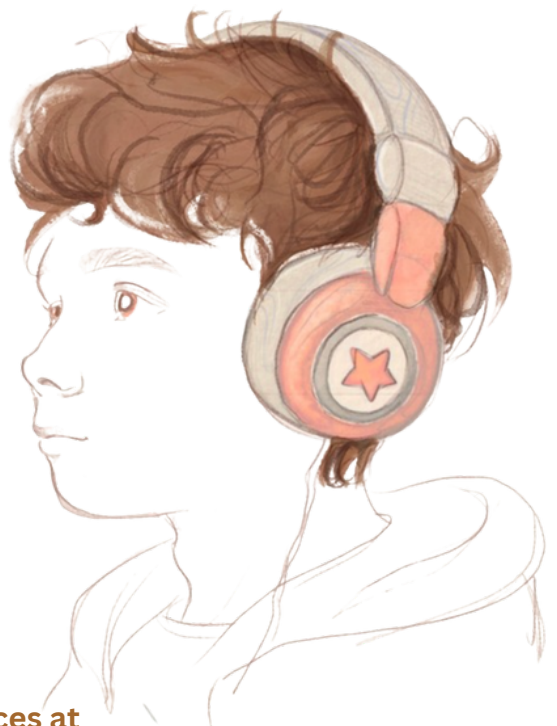
Not every child will want to answer questions. Offer them lightly and without pressure.

You might ask:

- What do you think Dylan is feeling right now?
- Have you ever felt stuck between two choices like that?
- Why do you think this decision feels so big for him?
- What might Dylan be worried about?
- What do you think might help Dylan right now?

The goal is not to get the "right" answer.

The goal is to help children notice and name emotions.



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www.ourlifetales.com.au

Conversation Starters After Reading

If the child is open to talking, these prompts can help deepen the discussion.

You might ask:

- What part of Dylan's story stood out to you?
- Did anything remind you of your own experiences?
- What do you think helped Dylan the most?
- What would you say to Dylan if you were his friend?
- Do you think it's possible to care about two things at the same time?

Some young people may share very little. Others may open up unexpectedly. Both responses are normal.

Helpful Things Carers Can Say

When young people feel torn or guilty, reassurance is often more helpful than advice.

Helpful responses include:

- It makes sense that this feels hard."
- "You can care about more than one thing at the same time."
- "There isn't always a perfect choice."
- "You don't have to figure everything out on your own."
- "Your feelings matter."

Avoid rushing to solve the problem. Feeling understood helps young people think more clearly.

Signs a Young Person May Be Feeling Emotionally Stuck

Sometimes children cannot explain what they are feeling.

Instead, it may show up as:

- Irritability or anger
- Avoiding decisions
- Withdrawal from activities
- Saying "I don't care"
- Feeling guilty about things outside their control

These behaviours often signal emotional overwhelm rather than defiance. What helps most is calm support and emotional safety.

A Gentle Reminder for Carers

Young people are still learning how to hold complicated emotions. They may feel love, anger, hope, sadness, and loyalty all at the same time.

- Your role is not to fix every situation.
- Your role is to help them feel safe enough to talk, feel, and think things through.

When a young person feels supported, they slowly build the skills needed to manage difficult decisions and emotions.

That is where resilience begins.

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Quick Tips for Carers

1. Slow the Conversation Down

When emotions are high, the brain struggles to think clearly. Avoid rushing a child toward a decision or a solution.

Helpful approach:

Pause. Listen. Give space.

You might say:

- "You don't have to decide everything right now."
- "Let's just talk about how it feels first."

Feeling understood helps young people regulate their emotions before problem-solving.

2. Name the Mixed Feelings

Young people often feel confused because they are experiencing several emotions at once.

They may feel love, anger, sadness, loyalty, and guilt all at the same time.

You can help by gently naming what you notice.

Examples:

- "It sounds like you care about both things."
- "Part of you wants to go, and part of you doesn't."
- "That sounds really hard to hold."

Naming emotions helps young people make sense of what is happening inside them.

3. Reassure Them They Are Not Responsible for Adult Problems

Children often believe they must keep everyone happy. This creates pressure and guilt.

Clear reassurance can reduce that emotional burden.

You might say:

- "This situation isn't your fault."
- "Adults are responsible for adult decisions."
- "You're allowed to think about what you need too."

Young people need permission to care for themselves without feeling disloyal.

4. Focus on Feelings Before Solutions

Adults naturally want to fix problems quickly. However, problem-solving works best after emotions are acknowledged.

Instead of saying:

"Just go to the visit" or "Just go to the game."

Try:

- "What feels hardest about this?"
- "What worries you most?"
- "What might help you feel a little better?"

his helps the child feel heard rather than directed.

5. Accept That There May Not Be a Perfect Choice

Sometimes both options matter deeply. When that happens, the goal is not finding the perfect answer.

The goal is helping the young person understand that difficult choices are part of life and they do not have to face them alone.

Helpful reassurance:

- "Sometimes there isn't a perfect choice."
- "Both things can matter."
- "We can work through it together."

6. Watch for Behaviour That Signals Emotional Overload

When young people feel stuck, their emotions may show through behaviour rather than words.

Common signs include:

- Irritability or anger
- Avoiding decisions
- Withdrawal from activities
- Saying "I don't care"
- Repeatedly asking for reassurance

These behaviours are often signs the young person is overwhelmed rather than being difficult.

Respond with calm curiosity rather than discipline.

7. Your Presence Matters More Than Perfect Words

You do not need the perfect response.

What helps most is being a calm, safe adult who is willing to listen.

Young people learn emotional resilience through relationships — by experiencing adults who stay steady when things feel confusing or overwhelming.

Sometimes the most powerful message a carer can give is simply:

"You don't have to carry this on your own."



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