



## **CHOICE-MAKING STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS**

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice

By the time lunch arrives, you have made countless choices. For example, you chose when to wake up, what to wear to work or school, whether to shower or brush your teeth first, what to have for breakfast, how to get to work or school, and whether to pack a lunch. Brown and colleagues state that “all people, regardless of disability, should participate to the greatest extent possible, in decisions that enable increased control over their lives” (1993, p. 318).

In essence, children and adults prefer to be able to make choices. Choice-making opportunities occur when an adult gives another person two or more specific options from which to select. Providing opportunities to make choices is an appropriate strategy to use with people of all ages in a variety of contexts (home, school, community). The research literature confirms that choice making can be effective with persons with a variety of disabilities in improving desirable behaviors while decreasing and eliminating undesirable behaviors.

### ***Effects of Choice-Making Strategies***

#### *Improvements in Desirable Behaviors:*

- On-task/task engagement
- Number of task initiations
- Accurate performance
- Work productivity
- Affect
- Food acceptance

#### *Decreases in Undesirable Behaviors:*

- Number of verbal/nonverbal protests
- Noncompliance/resistance
- Problem/disruptive behavior
- Aggression
- Screaming/tantrums
- Food rejection

## ***WHY PROVIDING CHOICES IS IMPORTANT***

Bannerman and colleagues and others give many reasons for presenting individuals who display inappropriate behaviors with opportunities to make choices during daily routines:

- Allowing a child to make a choice can promote independence. This is particularly helpful for children with disabilities who may over-depend on adults to help them complete daily activities.
- Giving a child choices may alert him or her to begin to self-monitor appropriate behaviors. Often, children who display problematic behaviors hear over and over how “bad” they behave instead of what they are doing well.
- Making choices can give a child a sense of control over his or her daily activities. Children often resist activities or situations that they do not like and for which they have no control over the outcome. In contrast, an opportunity to make a choice may promote compliance in the specific activity, with the child influencing certain aspects of the activity.
- With the sense of control that choices may provide, the child may be more likely to actively participate in activities where choices are consistently offered. Active participation is critical to a child’s development both academically and socially.
- In situations where choices are present, children may experience improved performance. Improvements in either social or academic situations are typically a goal for most children who display behavioral problems.
- Repeated opportunities to make choices during daily routines can provide a child with a positive, general sense of well-being, both psychological and physical. Thus, choice making can take on an intrinsic value for a child.
- Presenting children with a choice promotes behavior and values linked to responsibility. When children have a sense of responsibility, they can then be held more accountable for their actions.
- Research data demonstrate that when children with behavioral problems or other disabilities are given opportunities to make choices, their inappropriate behaviors decrease.

## ***IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHOICE***

Giving a child opportunities to make choices is simple—you are just manipulating situations, tasks, or items already available in your home and community. Thus, providing choices is both practical and cost effective. Any child can benefit from having choices; however, choices for children who display problem behaviors can be a very powerful strategy that promotes appropriate communication and actions. The child who used to display problem behaviors when interacting with the environment may use appropriate behaviors when given choices. Children can be given many different types of choices throughout their day to varying degrees—from basic to complex. Ten types of choices are listed in the research on choice making by Sigafos, Shevin and Klein, and Jolivette and colleagues:

*1. Where – choice of the location where the child is going to play or work*

Jamie has a history of not completing his homework, which has resulted in many battles at home. One evening, Jamie's father asked as they prepared to begin the night's homework, "Do you want to do your homework at the kitchen table or at your desk?" Jamie replied, "Oh, my desk will work." They gathered around the desk with Jamie working while his father read.

*2. When – choice of the time when the child is going to begin to play or work*

Lisa likes to take baths but does not like to brush her teeth and will often tantrum when told to do so. Her mother decided to give her a choice: "Would you like to brush your teeth before or after you take your bath?" Lisa replied, "After." She took her bath, and her mother reminded her about when she chose to brush her teeth.

*3. Within – choice of the specific materials the child needs to complete the play or work*

On Saturdays, the family usually has a "picnic" lunch in the family room or in the backyard. Family members catch up on everyone's activities. During these lunches, Cory repeatedly leaves the area and goes to the kitchen to retrieve a "different" spoon, fork, knife, plate, bowl, or cup, stating, "I need a different one." Recently, his mother and father have begun nagging Cory to stay with the family and to make do with the items provided. But this approach has made his behavior worse, and now his siblings do not want to participate in the family lunches. As a result, Cory's father decides to provide Cory with a choice of items and says, "We are having soup, crackers, and a drink for lunch. Which of these three bowls [pointing to three choices] do you want your soup in?" Cory selected the green bowl, his soup was poured, and he was prompted to take his soup to the picnic area. (In this case, it may be appropriate for Cory to select all his items and then to carry the selected items on a tray to the area.)

*4. Who – choice of with whom the child is going to play or work*

At bedtime, Sally often delays going to bed by spending a lot of time in the bathroom brushing her hair. Sally's sister, whose job it is to remind Sally to go to bed, decides to give Sally a choice: "Would you like me, Dad, or Mom to read you a story in bed?" Whomever Sally selects then quickly reads the story.

*5. Between/among (order) – choice of what the child is going to play or work on*

When the family goes to the park, Lana seems to want to play on whatever piece of equipment her sister is currently on. She typically runs to the equipment and pushes her sister off the equipment, yells at her sister to move, hits her sister until she moves, or pulls at the equipment. On the way to the park, Lana's mother gives her a choice: "This park has swings, slides, scooters, and rings. Lana, which of these do you want to play on first?" Lana replies, "The swings." Her mother then states, "Good, you can play on the swings first. Betsy, which will you play on?" As they leave the car, her mother reminds Lana that she has selected the swings to use first.

*6. Terminate – choice of the time the child is going to stop playing or working*

John does not like to clean his room. When asked to do so, he pushes or hits his mother until she concedes and says that he can do it later (later never comes). Relatives are coming to visit, and John's mother knows that she needs to prompt him to clean his room. This time she gives John a choice embedded in the prompt: "John, because Grandma is coming to visit, we both need to clean the house. While you clean

your bedroom, I will clean the bathroom, but I thought it would be fun if you told us a time we should stop cleaning and take a break. I bought us ice cream sandwiches to reward our hard work. Let's see, it is 10 o'clock – what time after 10:30 should we take a break?" At the time selected by John, his mother comes into his room with the ice cream sandwich and praises his hard work.

*7. Future – choice of what the child is going to play or work on in the future*

Steve has difficulties seeing tasks to completion. For example, he often begins a game with his brother, but before the game finishes, he will walk away and begin another game by himself or will ask his brother to change games. His brother will no longer play with Steve, and when he refuses, Steve yells and throws toys at him. Steve's mother suggests that his brother provide Steve with a choice, so he says, "Steve, if you agree to play a game of UNO with me for the next five minutes, then you can choose the next game we play for five minutes." Steve replies, "OK, but then I want us to build a fort with Legos." At the end of the five minutes (regardless of whether or not the UNO game is finished), they begin playing with Legos.

*8. Tangible – choice of specific items the child needs before, during, or after playing or working*

Janice has been told to stop watching television and to sit at the kitchen table to write her birthday thank-you cards. She turns the television off and sits at the kitchen table. Her mother walks by five minutes later and sees Janice still sitting there, twirling her pencil. Janice has not begun her task. Her mother then gives Janice a choice: "Would you like to use a blue pen, a purple gel pen, or a green felt tip pen to write your thank-you cards?" Janice selects the purple gel pen and then quickly finishes the task.

*9. Refusal – choice of whether or not to begin or finish playing or working*

At Jim's birthday party, a two-team game called "drop the clothespin in the jar" begins while Jim is in the bathroom. When he returns to the party, Jim yells, "I don't want anyone playing that game in my house!" His father tells Jim that the game has already started and that he has the choice of either joining one of the teams or sitting and watching. Jim states that he will sit and watch and ends up cheering both teams on.

*10. Alternative – choice of the method (how) the child is going to complete the playing or working*

It's Joe's week to set the table, a family chore he neither likes nor does accurately. In fact, the family jokes about what items Joe will place on the table; they have had soup with tea saucers, not bowls, and salad with spoons, not forks. As his sister prepares dinner, his mother models (by placing the items on a mat in a specific order while saying what items are needed for tonight's meal) a completed dinner setting for Joe. She tells that he can set the table by following her example or can decide how he will set the table as long as each place has the correct items. His mother walks away and Joe says, "I'm going to do it my way." He begins setting the table by giving everyone a cup, then a plate, then silverware and a napkin. Joe completes the task accurately but does so by placing the items in the opposite order as was modeled by his mother.

## **CHOICE AS A TEACHING TOOL**

By providing your child with opportunities to make choices during situations where inappropriate behavior is or is not displayed, you are giving your child a lifelong

skill. Being able to make a choice, recognize opportunities provided by others to make choices, and initiate choice-making opportunities lays the foundation for independent and successful living. In addition to teaching choice making, you are giving the child logical examples of consequences of his actions.

For example, Jacob and his mother are at a restaurant where the children's lunch options are macaroni and cheese and a hot dog. Jacob does not like hot dogs but chooses to order one for lunch. When the hot dog arrives, he says he does not want it and begins to pout. His mother explains to him that he had two choices (macaroni and cheese or a hot dog) and that he selected the hot dog. Jacob sits with his arms folded, refuses to eat his hot dog, and will not speak to his mother. His mother finishes her meal, and they leave the restaurant. In this situation, the natural consequence for Jacob's choice was made clear – you receive what you choose.

To reinforce choice-making skills in children who display inappropriate behaviors, the family may want to consider the following:

- Be consistent on the number of choices.
- Provide a variety of types of choices.
- Offer multiple choices throughout the day.
- Provide basic (white milk or chocolate milk) to more complex (which video to rent) choices, depending on the child's ability.
- Reinforce the child's choice by providing the item selected.
- Reinforce choice-making opportunities initiated by child ("Can I choose which task to do first?").

Giving a child opportunities to make choices can teach the child more appropriate behaviors to use during less preferred situations and can promote more independent behaviors. Choice making has a long history of being an effective and efficient strategy for teaching children how to become lifelong decision makers.

### **References**

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