

Behavior Bits

Volume 3: The Importance of Choice

Written by the Augusta County Public Schools BCBA's (Board Certified Behavior Analysts)

Choice and Control

"Because I said so!" is a phrase that many of us are relying on during this extended school closure. While it is important to establish yourself as the authority figure in your home, children thrive when given the control to make their own choices.

When we feel like we have no sense of control over our life, we are more likely to feel anxious, stressed, and act out. Our children feel the same way, especially with all of the uncertainty about when they will return to school, see their friends, etc. Presenting children with choices is a natural way to empower them with a sense of control.

It is important to only present choices to a child that you are willing to honor. Choices should not be utilized to set an ultimatum, but instead to teach our children how to make smart choices. By only presenting appropriate choices, we can always praise their behavior of making a choice. When we create more opportunities for children to be in control, it increases their overall willingness to do what we ask them to do because they feel like they have ownership of their actions and decisions.

Presenting Choices: Elementary Aged Students

Research has shown that choice-making opportunities can be an effective tool in reducing problem behavior and increasing engagement in tasks/activities. So what can this look like in the home setting for younger children?

Choices can be presented in a number of ways. For instance:

- Actual objects: items around the house can be held or pointed to (i.e. toys, food, etc)
- Pictures: drawings, google images or actual photos of items
- Choice board: an array of pictures or words
- Words: verbally state options

A good way to start giving choices is to select two or three things for them to choose from. For children who are easily overwhelmed, an "either/or" choice works best.

Children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions.
-Alfie Kohn

Presenting Choices: Middle and High School Students

Incorporating choices is also a way to give teenagers a sense of independence. Here is one method to promote choice:

- **Behavioral contract:** A behavioral contract is a written statement between yourself and your child that specifies what behavior must be performed before they can choose a preferred activity, and what is an acceptable activity. Both you and your child sign it, which makes the agreement seem more concrete. Allowing your student to help create the agreement adds an element of control.

- For example, "Joe will vacuum the whole house. When he is done, he can choose to play video games or skateboard for 30 minutes."



<https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/behavioral-contract/>

Choices Develop Decision-Making Skills

Decision-making is an important skill for children of all ages to develop. When children practice this skill through choice-making, it allows them to own their successes and their mistakes.

We are faced with decision-making daily. It is important for us to help children develop this skill through providing appropriate choices. For example, a child's ability to spell words is necessary for them to succeed as a reader and writer. Instead of telling your child to study their spelling words, you can present choices to facilitate a decision. In this example, you could ask, "**When would you like to study your spelling words, before or after dinner?**" Allowing your child to make this decision will empower him or her to make choices that will affect the rest of his or her life.

