

"Giving Children Choices in Discipline"

Condensed from *Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline*

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Young children, who are **developing a sense of their own autonomy**, often need to assert themselves when they hear an adult command, which can lead to a face-off. Instead of giving an assertive command, you can **offer your child two acceptable choices**. These choices allow your child to comply with your wishes while also giving him the "last word".

Most of us have been raised with what I call "false choices" such as, "You can mow the grass, or be grounded". These are false choices because the parent is presenting one preferred (good) choice, and one negative (bad) choice, with the intent of coercing the child. Another way in which a parent may give a child a false choice is with words that seem to put the child in charge of situations that he does not actually control. "Put your pajamas on, okay?" "Could you please get dressed?" False choices give an illusion of control by seeming to place one person in charge of another. The illusion bursts when your child behaves differently than you thought he would, or should, and then you threaten punishment. Parents who offer false choices are afraid to say what they really want, or don't know what they want.

All children can benefit from being offered two positive choices, but the choices must be age appropriate. Parent must structure choices for children because too many decisions are overwhelming to children. The following guidelines will help you provide children with choices:

1. Offer children under the age of five a choice between two predetermined events or objects. It works like this: Clothing: "You have a choice. You may wear the blue shirt or the red shirt". Activities: "You have a choice. You may build blocks, or draw." Never offer a young child a choice about the daily schedule ("Are you ready for bed?"); adult activities ("Could mommy leave you with daddy now and go shopping?"); relationships ("Would you like to spend Christmas with your dad or your mom?"); or situations that put the child or others in danger.
2. Some children need more limited, structured choices that others in order to stay focused and on task. Instead of constantly steering these children, use choices to help them steer themselves. Choices give these children the structure they need, while allowing them to practice decision-making. Ultimately, choices could help build self-esteem while these children learn to operate successfully within a given framework.
3. With children over the age of five, you no longer have to structure their choices with two predetermined options. Usually, a school age child can handle as many options as commands. If your child cannot handle multiple commands, continue to provide more structured, limited choices.
4. As your child gets older, he can also contribute to a discussion about rules, routines, and daily schedules. However, it is vital for you to realize that these ultimately remain adult decisions.
5. Anxious or overwhelmed children respond better to assertive commands than to choices. When your child is out of control, tighten the reins, reduce the choices, and take over until he bounces back.

A person's ability to make choices and to accept responsibility for those choices is a measure of self-esteem. In order to really make a choice, you must make a decision and accept the consequences of that decision. This is called commitment. Therefore, it is vital to help children who have trouble making choices and/or accepting the consequences of their choices. You can only help your children if you choose to help yourself first. It is impossible to make your own choices and simultaneously please others. **As a parent, you cannot set a limit and take care of your child's feelings at the same time.**

Children who have trouble making choices fall into three groups: Those who refuse to make a choice, those who resist the given structure, and those who change their minds.

Tremendous anxiety is brewing within those children who find decision-making very difficult. This difficulty is their way of saying, "My world is overwhelming." To assist children who have trouble making choices, do the following:

- Point out to the child the many choices he makes every day. For instance, when he decides to color with crayons, say, "I see you chose to draw today."
- Offer your child small choices that involve closeness with you. For example, ask which hand your child would like to hold as you cross the street.
- Model acceptance of mistakes. Your child needs to see you make a mistake, forgive yourself, and then learn from your error. Many children are taught that, no matter what you do, an apology will eliminate the problem. Children must learn that, while it is important to express regrets about misdeeds, you must also change some misguided behavior.

Some children will use the structured choices you offer as an opportunity for a power struggle. Such children, when offered two options, consistently create a third reason for this behavior. These children are testing-but not to make you angry or to see what they can away with. They are testing to figure out who they are (where they end and you begin), and to discover their uniqueness. To assist a child who resists structured choices for developmental reasons, do the following:

- Realize that if you allow yourself to be dragged into a power struggle, you will be operating from a negative basis.
- Once you are in control of yourself, recognize that your child will choose to operate within your framework, or not. Coercion by you or the child is the problem, not the answer.
- Use the parroting technique. This involves repeating the options you have presented to your child in a calm, assertive voice. If your child chooses to cooperate with you, celebrate his choice. The child who chooses to comply has just completed a difficult process. From the depth of your heart, praise your child, and celebrate a difficult process. From the depth of your heart, praise your child, and celebrate his victory. If opposition escalates, offer empathy to help him move through his fit and return to a cooperative state.

The second type of child who resists structured choices has learned that this is an effective way to get his needs met. Although an oppositional child will challenge your patience, you must maintain self-control to help him. To assist a child who opposes structure, do the following:

- Forgive yourself. Since all power struggles end in someone getting hurt, you will probably feel guilty, and guilt can lead to permissive parenting. Permissive parenting leads to the creation of demanding, willful, oppositional children. Stop the cycle by truly forgiving yourself.
- Engage your child in solving problems. If the child has reasonable suggestions, try them. Don't change the bedtime, though.
- Help your child feel powerful. Do this by giving him the chance to participate often in activities that he enjoys and at which he can succeed.
- Play with your child regularly. If you concentrate on playing with young children for at least five minutes a day, you may reduce the power struggles by as much as fifty percent.

Children who frequently change their minds may have self-esteem problems. Through indecisiveness they try to control others and their environment. When an inability to choose appears from nowhere and occurs only infrequently, the child may be temporarily overwhelmed by stress. When children regress like this, they need assertive commands, not choices. Teaching decision-making to a six-month-old infant would be silly, and the same is true for highly stressed children who have temporarily regressed.

If this is a chronic problem, however, there is a good chance that is a learned behavior. The child gets more attention by changing her mind than she does for being cooperative. Slow down, be with your child, and celebrate her choices to be cooperative.

For more information on this topic,
please see the book by Becky Bailey, [Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline](#)