

ENGAGING COOPERATION THROUGH CHOICE & PREFERENCE

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We're going to begin this article by stating the obvious: "People perform better – and, in general, behave better – when they feel that they have some control over their circumstances and actions." This includes children with special needs, especially if their opportunities to exert this type of influence have been limited in the past. Several studies have supported this common sense perspective, showing that incorporating choice and preference into required activities (e.g., academics, chores) dramatically improves children's participation and reduce problems with behavior. This article will describe how to use choices and preferences to improve children's cooperation and behavior.

Offering Choices

Being allowed the opportunity to make choices should be viewed as a basic right for all people. Unfortunately, children with special needs – especially those with severe disabilities – have often been viewed as incapable of making appropriate choices. Highly structured special education programs and home activity practices also have a tendency to pre-empt opportunities for choices, about even the simplest decisions. The opportunity to make choices is important because it allows a child to control his or her surroundings. It allows children to be with people they enjoy, engage in activities they like, and take greater pleasure from their lives. In addition, we are learning that the act of choice making itself may be rewarding, regardless of the outcome of the selection. Providing opportunities for choice addresses problem behavior by providing a child a sense of 'empowerment' through the act of choosing.

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There are a variety of ways to offer choices. Choices can include what a child does or obtains through his behavior, when he does certain things, with whom he interacts, and how he accomplishes activities. Choices can be between two options or among a variety of options. Choices can simply require pointing or a head nod, or demand more elaborate communicative forms. During a typical day, children may be given choices regarding which clothes to wear, foods to eat, toys to use, or things to do. When asking children to do things they may not enjoy such as brushing their teeth or doing their homework, choices can engage their cooperation. Here is a summary of some of the ways in which choices can be offered:

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Provide a choice of:

- activities or tasks to complete
- the order in which tasks are completed
- materials to use for the activity
- where to complete activity or task
- when to complete activity or task
- with whom to complete task

Incorporating Preferences

Everyone has particular preferences and tends to participate more fully in activities when those preferences are honored. Children may be more cooperative when items or conditions they like are embedded in daily activities. For example, children may willingly complete challenging routines when they are allowed to use preferred products (e.g., favorite toothpaste, special basket for toys) or listen to music or converse while engaged. They may tolerate having to wait or to entertain themselves better if they have their favorite toy or book. Long or difficult tasks may be more tolerable if interspersed with “mini fun breaks” in which they are allowed to stretch or monitor their progress with a sibling or parent. The key to using preferences to engage children and improve behavior is individualizing the modification to assure it reflects a child’s specific likes or interests. Here are some examples of ways preferences can be incorporated into daily activities:

1. Provide preferred activities when a child has to wait or sit still
2. Stock independent play areas with favorite items in child’s reach
3. Incorporate a child’s hobbies or interests into activity or task
4. Alternate preferred and non-preferred activities throughout the day

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Example of Using Choice and Preference

Aidan, age 9, had problems following directions and refused to complete or destroyed his assigned work at school even though he was able to complete it without difficulty. When given instructions, he often said, “Don’t tell me what to do” or “I’ll do what I want.” When pushed, he would yell or leave the area. Aidan’s support team was pretty sure that the goal of his behavior was to escape being told what to do.



Because of his difficulty accepting instructions, his team decided to offer him choices before presenting work to be done and try to make his work more enjoyable – without reducing their expectations. For example, Aidan’s spelling work usually required him to independently write 20 assigned spelling words three times each, place the words in alphabetical order, and record definitions for each of the 20 words. Instead, the team decided to allow him to complete the tasks in any order or choose among alternative equivalent tasks such as creating a cross-word puzzle or alphabetized word search on the computer or listing synonyms or antonyms instead of definitions. He was also allowed to use erasable colored pencils to complete his spelling.

At home, Aiden’s parents used similar principles to help Aiden complete his chores. On Saturdays, they created a list of tasks that needed to be done and then circulated the list among the family members to take turns choosing which chores they wanted to do. Aiden was allowed to complete the chores in any order and listen to his music (that is, as long as he was working). These small changes improved Aiden’s cooperation with tasks at home and school, and actually helped Aiden become more productive and proficient in completing his work.

Finding creative ways to incorporate choice and preference into children’s daily routines is a proactive way to improve children’s behavior and performance, as well as reduce headaches for parents and teachers. With the increased cooperation, children can learn skills more quickly and may generally be happier and productive. There are endless options for integrating choice and preference into activities regardless of the children’s abilities and needs.

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