

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors through Using Choices and Preferences

What is the child-choice strategy?

Offering choices to children involves allowing them to decide what they want (their choices and preferences) and then giving them access to the items or activities they choose. This strategy consists of offering choices among two or more types of materials or activities. Depending upon the child's ability level, choices can be offered verbally ('Do you want the red ball or the blue ball?'), using picture cards (photographs or sketches of the red ball and the blue ball) or using the specific choice of materials (showing the child a red ball and a blue ball while you pose the question). Another example might be to allow children to choose the color of construction paper they want to use or to select between crayons or markers for an art project. Evidence suggests that child-choice is effective because it allows children to feel that they have some control or power over the environment. This control motivates the child to participate and remain engaged longer, reducing the use of challenging behaviors.

Why is it important to allow children to make choices?

When children are engaged with activities, toys, materials and people that they enjoy, they are more inclined to follow instructions, have better behavior, be more involved and work together as a part of the classroom. Therefore, teachers can directly promote good behavior by helping children gain access to their preferred toys, materials, activities and even playmates. This strategy is most effective when choices are offered both within activities (e.g., choosing a song during circle time or choosing a friend to sit beside at lunch) and between activities (e.g., choosing between two centers). If it is difficult to determine a child's preferences, ask parents and others who are familiar with the child or observe the child's responses to various items, activities or classmates.

What can you do in your classroom?

You can offer choices all though the day including during meals, chores, centers, routines and free play. Types of choices may include allowing children to select materials during an activity, choosing what activity will come next or choosing a friend to sit with at lunch. Few or no additional resources are needed to use this child-choice strategy, however, you may need to create a 'choice board' using pictures or symbols for some children. The number of pictures presented on the choice board should be based on the child's skill level; fewer choice options should be offered to younger children or children whose cognitive skills are less advanced. You can increase the number of choices over time as the child becomes familiar with the strategy.

Research about this topic:

Research has shown that challenging behaviors, including aggression and disruption, have been positively affected by allowing children to make choices. Decreases in the amount of acting-out behavior and increases in children's interest and involvement can be expected. Often these changes happen relatively quickly after child-choice strategies have been used consistently. Other benefits include positive effects on young children's:

- willingness to follow directions and requests,
- ability to work and play without adult guidance,
- interactions with other children and adults,
- ability to express their needs and wants in an appropriate way, and
- motivation and persistence to stick with a task or project.

Food for thought:

'The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice.' ~ George Eliot

Young and old alike...people need to feel a sense of control over some aspects of their day. The ability to make good choices as adults comes from years of practice with making choices and living with the consequences of those choices. By giving young children the chance to make small choices each day, you will help them feel more confident in the future as they carve their own destiny.