



EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

MOVING LIVES FORWARD

FREEDOM COMES FOR CHILD AND PARENT

when offering choices

Would you like an apple or a banana? It is important to have a choice, as we as adults make choices everyday. It is especially important for children to have a choice; it helps them feel a sense of autonomy and it makes things easier for you as a caregiver! It is not particularly important whether they choose the apple or the banana. What is important is that he/she is given a real choice. Most importantly a choice YOU as the caregiver like! It's a win win really!

With toddlers, preschool age and beyond there can be a lot of "you may nots." You may not: stay home alone, eat when you want, cross the street by yourself, lock the bathroom door, turn on the water, stay inside while the other children go outside, go to bed when you are ready, skip wearing boots, get yourself an aspirin, buy a guinea pig, or open the refrigerator. Because there are so many things our young ones may not be permitted to do simply because of safety or health precautions, it is difficult for them to feel a sense of control in their lives. But this is exactly what children need to develop a sense of autonomy...a sense that he is an independent and competent individual in his own right.

One of the best ways to develop a sense of autonomy is to make choices. When we make our own choices we feel a sense of control. With repeated opportunities to make our own decisions we begin to think of ourselves as in control of at least parts of our lives. Young children need to feel a sense of control in order to develop healthy personalities. For example two year olds are particularly into control issues, we commonly hear stories about the terrible two's and children who love to say "no;" two's who fear loss of control (particularly

of bathroom habits); and two's who have learned how to manipulate parents and run the show at home. It is all a matter of control. So here are some tips to help them feel some sense of control but you control the choices! Having them gain control in positive ways through choice reduces the When giving choices be authentic. An authentic choice is real. The child's choice matters. If the child chooses the apple, we don't serve them the banana instead. When offering a child a choice, the adult needs to respect the child's decision. Don't ask, "Do you want to..." unless you are prepared for a "no" answer.

Playtime is a perfect opportunity to offer children choices about what they will do, for how long, and with whom. Caregivers who offer children the options of working in blocks, paint, puzzles, or dramatic play are taking advantage of using developmentally appropriate curriculum to build emotional competence. When caregivers do not set limits on what is available to them all the time they feel the freedom to decide for themselves. The child experiences the satisfaction of making a decision that has real consequences for his life. Remember choices you like and provide.

Cheryl's Corner of Caring

"When you come out of the storm, you are not going to be the same; you are going to be stronger, wiser and ready for new growth."

FREEDOM WITH CHOICES CONTINUED

It's important to point out that children can become overwhelmed by too many options. Choices need to be limited. For example, the child may decide whether he wants to read a story before his nap or after his nap. He may decide which of three stories he would like read. He may select four toys to sleep with. He may decide which of two blankets he prefers and may select which of two songs he'd like to listen to as he drifts off to sleep. Reasonable parameters need to be set. When the adult makes two or three suggestions from which the child may choose, we know that the child's choice can be honored. On the other hand when safety or health is at risk, it is important for the adult to say, "Now it is my turn to choose for all of us." Adults can also help children learn to live and work in harmony by defining for them which actions are not choices. Throwing sand, for example, is not a choice. Children may choose to play in the sand without throwing it or they may choose something else to do. In addition, hitting and name-calling etc are not acceptable choices.

While it may be easier for the adult to make a choice for the child, it is well worth the effort it takes to provide children with the opportunity to take pride in their ability to make independent choices. Look for opportunities in all of the everyday aspects of life. Can the child choose which pair of socks or shirt to wear when given a few options? Could there be two options for snack? Could there be several colors of play dough or paint available? Would you like one cracker or two crackers? Could the children decide which way we'll take our walk today? Children can also be offered options about when or in which order they prefer to do activities. This is particularly helpful when there is no option about what to do, but there is a choice about when to do it. For example, children may choose whether they would like to play outdoors before or after rest time.

Choices set up children for bigger successes in life. For example the best way to learn to ride a bicycle is to ride one. The best way to learn to play a musical instrument is to practice. The best way to learn to ski is to get out on the slopes. The best way to learn how to make good choices is to make lots of choices and learn what it means to live with the consequences of one's decisions.

Our lives are defined by the choices we make. Our choices drive us forward, stall us, or hold us back. We need to learn how to make good choices that will give our lives experiences that will be positive and productive. We need to

learn how to make choices that will benefit and build up. The best way to help children learn to make wise choices is to start early, when the choices are inconsequential. It does not matter much if we choose the apple or the banana. However, the opportunity to make that choice brings with it a most important life lesson. If we have the apple, we are stuck with the apple. We can't change our mind and exchange it for a banana. Our decisions have consequences. Children need to live with the consequences of their choices. That is how they will learn to think through their decisions and be prepared to live with their choices.

If children learn to live with their decisions when they are small, and if they are given many, many opportunities to make choices as they are growing up, then it is more likely that they will be able to make wise decisions when they are older, when the consequences can bring repercussions much more serious than apple or banana. Practice can improve decision-making ability just as it can improve reading ability.

Create some more choices for your kiddos and enjoy some more FREEDOM in your life. Promise!

[Click to View Sources:](#)

[Aha! Parenting](#)

[PennState Extension](#)

[Psychology Today](#)

[Motherly](#)

[This-N-That Parenting](#)

[Red Tricycle](#)



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