

Offering Children Choices: Encouraging Autonomy and Learning While Minimizing Conflicts

By Sue Grossman Ph. D.

One of the principles of developmentally appropriate practice reads, "Following their own interests, children choose among various activities..." (Bredekamp & Copple, 1996, p. 127). Why is choosing important? If children are allowed choices, are they in control of the curriculum?

There are several reasons that giving children choices throughout the day is beneficial, even crucial to their development. Providing choices for children is a fundamental aspect of high-quality early childhood curriculum (Hendrick, 1996). In order to provide children with a number of choices, the teacher must understand the importance of choices, and be willing and able to allow a variety of activities and behaviors in the classroom. This approach to learning is child-centered, rather than teacher-centered. Let's look at two early childhood classrooms.

In Ms. Anderson's class of four-year-olds, the children come in and put away their belongings, select an activity, and play until everyone arrives. Then they all sit together on the rug for about 10 minutes of group time. After they have sung a few songs, had some group conversation, and heard about the day's activity options, they choose the activity that appeals most to them and get to work. Throughout the morning, children move from center to center as they wish. A visitor would notice talking, laughing, and movement. Seldom would one hear adults' or children's voices raised in anger or frustration or see children out of control.

When the children arrive in Mr. Purdy's class of four-year-olds, they put away their things and head straight for the large group area where they must sit quietly, listen politely, and respond with correct answers to the teacher's questions for about 40 minutes. The activities of the day, each with a correct way of completing the task, are explained. Then Mr. Purdy assigns each child an activity. The children are to work quietly, follow directions carefully, obey the numerous classroom rules, and move to the next activity when he rings a bell. Mr. Purdy values order and quiet because he believes children learn better under those conditions. He keeps a list and checks off the name of each child to ensure that each one finishes every task. Children often become angry or frustrated and do not finish the tasks to Mr. Purdy's satisfaction. In fact, Mr. Purdy often complains about the misbehavior of his class.

In Mr. Anderson's class, children make many choices throughout the day; in Mr. Purdy's they make very few. Which is the better learning environment for children?

A Feeling of Control

All human beings need to feel as if they have control over themselves and their lives. We cannot expect children to be totally independent, of course, since they are small and incapable of many things adults can do. Erikson (1950) believed that at the second level of psychosocial development, beginning soon after one year of age, young

children must resolve the conflict between autonomy and shame and doubt. Children who do not develop autonomy are liable to remain dependent on adults or to be overly influenced by peers. Gartrell (1995) called this phenomenon "mistaken behaviors". Children who fall into "mistaken behaviors" may feel doubtful of their abilities, and be unable to take the risks that lead to real learning (Fordham & Anderson, 1992; Maxim, 1997) or challenge themselves to achieve at ever higher levels. In addition, they may feel hostility toward adults who allow them little freedom to choose (Edwards, 1993). Learning to be autonomous and self-reliant takes time and practice. When we offer children choices, we are allowing them to practice the skills of independence and responsibility, while we guard their health and safety by controlling and monitoring the options (Maxim, 1997).

Building Self-Esteem

Being autonomous and in control feels good – simply watch the face of a toddler who has just learned to walk. Self-esteem grows when we successfully do things for ourselves. Children can handle mistakes or failure with equanimity and good humor when they feel good about themselves. A child who has a solid sense of self-worth can make a poor decision, evaluate it calmly, rethink the situation, and make a different choice. When asked if he wanted to do it himself or have help, three-year-old Tom decided to pour his own juice. As he lifted and tipped the pitcher he discovered his small hand was not strong enough to hold the pitcher steady. A stream of apple juice spilled onto the table and the floor. The teacher said, "Oops, Tom, the juice spilled. Let's get some sponges and we'll wipe it up together." Tom learned by trying a task that was too difficult for him. The teacher helped him deal with the consequences by not criticizing his attempt but by helping him rectify the situation. Next time he may make another choice, or he may try to do it alone again. Either way, he has made his own choice.

When a child misbehaves, a teacher might rebuke him by saying severely, "Jamal! You just made a bad choice!" This statement presumes that Jamal consciously considered each behavior in repertoire and selected kicking, for example. Children, like adults, do not always consciously choose their behaviors. They may be satisfying a need, imitating behaviors of others, or acting out of an instinct such as self-protection. Angri-ly accusing a child of making a poor decision while correcting his behavior sends the message that he is an incompetent decision-maker and confuses the child's understanding of the decision-making process. He may believe that he had no right to make any decision at all, which in the end will lower his self-confidence and self-esteem as well as teach him that making decisions is very risky.

Cognitive Development

Making choices is part of problem solving. When given choices, children stretch their minds and create new and unique combinations of ideas and materials. Before they can make wise choices, however, children need to learn the skills of convergent thinking, knowing the right answer as well as divergent thinking, seeing many possible answers. If we expect teenagers to make healthful choices about important issues such as sexual activity or the use of alcohol or illegal drugs, we must allow them many opportunities in their early years to make meaningful choices (Morrison, 1997).

Moral Development

In a classroom based on Piaget's constructivist principles, everyone shares responsibility for decision making (DeVries & Zan, 1995). By allowing children to determine what goes on in a room, the teacher promotes their self-regulation. If they have opportunities to make their own choices and feel powerful every day, they will have no need to exert power over others or to break rules behind the teacher's back. When their desires are respected, it is easier for children to respect others' wishes. As children learn to make decisions for themselves and to develop autonomy, they learn to behave morally and to take the needs of others into consideration when making choices (Kamii, 1982).

Accepting Responsibility

When children do not like the results of their own choices, adults often want to pacify them by neutralizing the consequences. Alicia was so busy in the housekeeping area that she did not take time to visit the art table and make a glittery snow picture. When it was time to go home, she saw the beautiful creations other children had made, and she was very upset. "I want to make a snow picture!" she wailed. Ms. Anderson could have taken her to the art table, which was not completely cleaned up yet, and allowed her to make a quick picture so she could have one to take home, too. Instead, she said, "Alicia, you chose to stay in housekeeping area today and not make a picture. It's too late now, but tomorrow, we will have other art materials out. I'll help you remember to visit the art table and make something." Alicia was still upset. It is hard to accept the consequences of our behavior sometimes, but the teacher's response helped Alicia understand that she had made a decision, a decision with consequences she must accept. No one had told her what choice to make; she made her choice independently. The teacher offered help in the future, so Alicia knows she will have support to make better decisions. Alicia's parents might be displeased with this approach when she tells them tearfully that the teacher would not allow her to make a picture. But if they have understood from the time Alicia entered the program that the teacher's philosophy includes helping children learn to accept responsibility for their actions, they will understand.

Minimizing Conflicts

One of the effects of offering children choices throughout the day is the reduction of conflict among children and between children and adults. When adults direct a child's behavior most of the day, the child's natural desire to be independent is thwarted and feelings of resentment or rebellion may arise (Edwards, 1993). Adults can understand this frustration if they think about having a job in which they are told every little thing to do, even when to use the restroom or get a drink of water. Most of us would either complain or get another job. Children have no choice about going to school or child care; they cannot leave an unhappy situation. When they rebel, they are labeled as having "behavior problems." If we treat children with the same respect (Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 1993) we adults expect and understand that each child has individual needs and interests, we will provide them with the opportunities to choose what is best for themselves at any given time.

Maximizing Learning

Children feel more committed to an activity they have chosen themselves. Therefore, their attention span will likely be longer if they choose an activity than if they work at a task assigned by the teacher (Fromberg, 1995; Maxim, 1997). Making choices helps children learn persistence and task completion.

Katz and Chard (1989) point out that when only one teaching method is used, such as workbooks, some children will achieve the learning objective, but many will not, since each learns in a slightly different way. In order to ensure that all children learn a particular skill, like reading, we must use a variety of approaches so that each child can find the one that suits him or her. If Mr. Purdy, for example, wants all of his children to learn some important concepts about weather, he can offer a variety of activities. Some children will learn by observing the water cycle in a terrarium, others will learn from fiction and nonfiction books, and others will explore their personal experiences with weather by using paints and expressive materials. Each child will learn in his or her own way, but all will learn about weather.

How to Offer Choices

17 Choices offered to young children must be legitimate and meaningful to them and acceptable to adults. When Ms. Lee confronted two children fighting over the same ride-on truck, she said, "You two can figure out how to share that truck, or go to time out." Since neither child relished the thought of sitting in what amounts to solitary confinement in the time out chair, this was not a legitimate choice. Each option must have equal weight in the child's eyes. She might have said, "You can use the truck together, or I can help one of you find another truck to use."

Later in the day when Ms. Lee said, "It's time to clean up, OK?" she unknowingly offered children the option of cleaning up or continuing to play by adding "OK?" to the end of her sentence. She actually meant that it was nearly time to go home and they must put toys and materials away. She had not intended to give children a choice and was unable to allow them to continue to play because it was in fact time to get ready to leave.

Limiting choices for young children helps them select (Morrison, 1997). In a restaurant with many menu options even adults have difficulty choosing their meal. It may be easier for a child to choose if we suggest she decide between the art table and the block corner than from all the activities available in the classroom. Younger children manage better with fewer options.

Making direct suggestions may help the hesitant child to make a choice. Children whose parents make decisions for them may be overwhelmed by a situation in which they are now expected to choose for themselves. They need time, support, and practice as well as patient teachers to help them learn this skill.

By offering children choices we are not giving them complete control of the classroom or the curriculum. Since children may choose only from the alternatives offered, the teacher maintains control of what the options are. Juan may want to choose the water table every day, but on the days Ms. Anderson does not put it out, he must choose something else.

No Choice Situations

Each of us must deal with situations in which we have no choice. We are required to obey laws, for instance. Children, too, must learn that sometimes they have a choice. Issues of safety allow no leeway for individual preference (Gordon & Browne, 1996). Children may not play with the burner controls on the stove while helping to make cookies. When time is an issue they may have to stop playing and clean up, or get dressed for school so Mom and Dad can get to work on time. After the adults have made the primary decision, however, children can make secondary ones. They may choose to pour in the sugar or crack the eggs for the cookies. They can select the red or the green plaid shirt to wear. When children know they will be given sufficient opportunities to choose for themselves, they are more willing to accept those important "no choice" decisions adults must make for them.

Conclusion

The wise teacher understands that children make choices all day long, whether adults want them to or not. They choose to obey, ignore, or defy rules and directions and determine for themselves whether to speak kindly or angrily to others. They decide whether school or child care is a good place to be. Our task is to provide children with appropriate, healthful options and help them to make and accept their choices. In this way, we are developing confident, independent children who feel in control of themselves.

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