

To Choose or Not To Choose: Teaching Children Choices.

by Mark D. Ratta, MA., MBA, P.C.

It comes down to this; those who make the best choices are likely to have more satisfying lives. Luck, has a bit to do with it, but of far more importance is our ability to make choices. As important as it is even to our survival, you'd think we'd be born choice-makers. Instead we are born with incredible potential, and we have to learn the rest. This is where the importance of teaching children choice-making skills comes in.

As parents we can prepare children for only so many specific situations. But by fostering good choice-making skills in our kids, they are better prepared for problems that we as their parents could perhaps never have predicted.

Perhaps of even more importance, having choices is fertile soil for kids. Children and teens need to make choices not just for the practice of connecting them to outcomes and consequences, but also in order to have a sense of legitimate power - which they need. And if kids don't get what they need, the frustration can show itself in unfortunate ways.

We all want to feel some control over our lives. It's a sense of being able to make things happen for ourselves, an ability to direct the course of events in our world to improve our existence. It's a good feeling, it's healthy, and it's all about having choices. It's about feeling we have some control over what happens to us, and that since we have this control or *power* - we'll be OK. Often the more we believe this, the more secure we feel.

Now imagine being the child who does not feel this power. What is it like to be continually told what to do with never a choice to make? Look at what it's like for an adult. A lack of perceived choices is a main force in breaking people down in prison, and it is characteristic of the learned helplessness often seen in abused women. Ask these people about their belief that they can improve their situation and you have your answer. It's a feeling of being out of control, it is unpleasant to say the least, and it is unhealthy. This is not what we want for our children.

Children will often deal with a lack of choices in one of two ways. Either they rebel against the authorities in their lives, or they learn to be helpless and depressed. Because rebellion at least entails children gaining some sense of the power they need, I am almost tempted to conclude that this is the healthier of these two unfortunate alternatives. But given the life and death ways in which teens sometimes rebel, this cannot be the answer. In addition, as parent / child relationships suffer, so do the parents and the children.

However, the depth of depression that learned helplessness offers is not a viable option either. Imagine feeling you will "never" have control over your life, and that you couldn't cut it on your own even if you found the chance. One might even resent this to the point of thinking, "They may be able to keep me down, but they can't make me eat." Indeed, for some this is one of many possible avenues toward developing an eating disorder. We also can't make them learn or behave at school if they choose otherwise.

So should we let children do whatever they want for fear of damaging their sense of themselves? Some parents would say - yes. Some would say, "My parents were so strict that I'll make sure it's different for my child. We'll be the best of friends." What these parents want is the closeness they feel they missed due to the dictator style of parenting under which they were raised. God bless them for their motives, but often these parents go too far in giving up their parenting role for that of being a friend. These permissive parents allow plenty of choices, but fall short on providing the consequences their children need to develop good choice-making skills. Their children are at increased risk of running wild or ruling the household, and for whatever reason many are able or allowed to do so.

Therefore, the flip side to giving and allowing children choices is the necessity of providing appropriate consequences for those choices, and of setting limits for appropriate behavior. This can be seen in the analogy of shooting an arrow at a target. Normally if one observes the arrow has missed the bulls-eye, its location on the target provides the information needed to adjust ones aim next time to come closer to the mark. Now imagine the arrow was shot into the dark. Being unable to see where it landed, we have no way of adjusting our choice of aim to do better next time. This lack of perceived consequences does as little to improve archery skills as it does to help children learn choice making. A child needs to see the consequences of their choices, whether positive or negative, to become a better choice maker.

As a final note on the importance of "freedom within limits", imagine the confusion of having unlimited choices without the skills to choose wisely. Ask many of our recent high school graduates what it's like to wrestle with the multitude of college majors swirling around them, and despite their skills they will tell you of their anxiety. There are too many options for comfort, and the stakes are high. Now imagine the same confusion in deciding how to behave as a 14 year old. Whereas we might envy the recent graduate for their wealth of opportunities, the overwhelmed 14 year old is in greater danger of stumbling through behaviors that put them at risk. Children who grow up with appropriate limits set for appropriate behavior are more likely to know what to do, feel less anxious doing it, and be more secure about who they are.

The bottom line is that providing children with both choices and appropriate consequences is important in raising them to lead more productive and satisfying lives. Parents are the leaders of their families, and their insight and guidance is essential to the development of well-adjusted children.

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Working clinically with repeat juvenile offenders Mark created a successful anti-recidivism program toward making more effective and satisfying choices. He was also active in the high school Severe Behavioral Handicap program, the Sexual Assault Task Force, and the School Crisis Response Team.

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