

HELP YOUR CHILD MAKE GOOD CHOICES

You want what's best for your children – for them to grow into independent, self-reliant people who will be able to make healthy choices for themselves throughout their lives. The beginnings of that skill start as early as two years of age.

It is up to all of the adults in your children's daily lives, but especially in their immediate family, to know how to help support young children's growing ability in this area. Child development experts tell us that toddlers and preschoolers have the need to experience themselves as "autonomous" or having a sense of their own power in the world. This is why two-year-olds love to say "No!" They are beginning to realize that they have some control or choice over the situations they are in.

It is important for us to respect children's "no" wishes some of the time so that they have a healthy experience of their own power. Later on, when they are teens, children who have had earlier experiences where their choices were respected, will be the ones who are able to say "no" when a peer encourages them to do something they may not want to do.

On the other hand, contemporary American society has many examples of parents who want to be their child's friends and never say "no" themselves. This creates children who have the misguided sense that they are all-powerful, that their choices are always right and that they don't need to respect grown-ups. Child development experts (and wise old grandmas and grandpas) know that children need boundaries and limits set by caring adults who understand the world a bit better. Some parents may feel guilty or sad if their children don't understand or agree with grown-ups decisions but these feelings should not drive parenting choices. The effective parent should always strive to find a healthy balance between kid and adult-made decisions in their children's lives.

Some healthy ways to give young kids choices (and therefore a healthy sense of power) include:

- Asking which shoe they would like to put on first or which shirt they would like to wear
- Involving them in family decisions, like where to go on vacation
- Letting them help decide what's for dinner
- Letting them choose their bedtime story (even if you have read it a million times and are sick of it!)

There are so many ways to weave opportunities for children's choice-making into your parenting. What other ways can you come up with?

Making Good Choices

Giving children the opportunity to make choices is important but how do we help them make good choices?

1. Let your preschool and school-age child make decisions even if you think they are going to make a mistake. It's okay to let your child fail sometimes. That is how we human beings learn to do better. We can't truly learn right from wrong if we don't ever experience the results of a wrong choice. Doing something just because a grown-up "said so" doesn't help us become self-reliant. Out of love, we often want to protect our children from failure but this is not always the gift it appears to be.

Help your child be a "scientist" in the laboratory of life. Scientists make predictions, test out their predictions then reflect on the results afterwards to see if they were right. Help children think through the possible results of their choices ahead-of-time without telling them which choice you think they should make. Afterwards, without saying "I told you so!" help them reflect on what happened and what they might do differently next time.

2. Model good decision-making for them. Make good choices in your own life and point out to your child when you are doing so. For example, you might say "I was going to eat that snack but, no, it will ruin my appetite" or "I was going to say a bad word just now about that driver in the car ahead of us, but I won't."