

Giving children choices

Everyone likes to have choices in the things they do. Some child care providers think they need to do all the planning. They forget that children need choices. There are some children who will just go along with whatever an adult tells them to do. Others will become angry because they aren't given the chance to choose for themselves.

Giving children choices helps them feel like they have some power and control over what they do. It's a step in growing up. Everything isn't planned for them. Making good choices is a skill that children will use for the rest of their lives. The key to giving children choices is to first decide what choices you will allow them to make.

Good choices for children

A good way to start giving children choices is to select two or three things and let the child choose from them. These choices are easy to allow children to make:

- "Which book would you like to look at?"
- "Do you want to use a blanket during naptime?"
- "Would you like to use crayons or paint today?"
- "Would you like a peanut butter sandwich or a cheese sandwich?"

A key rule to remember is to give only choices that you can agree to. Some adults say things like, "Do you want to eat lunch now?" or "Do you want to go take a nap?" Do children really have a choice? What if the child says, "No, I want to play." These are times when choices shouldn't be given. Offer choices only when the child will truly be allowed to choose.

Giving children choices helps them feel like they have some control over their lives.

Battle of wills

Some child care providers think they need to keep all the children together to listen to a story or have all the children sit at the table until everyone is finished eating. They often find that every day turns into a battle because one wiggly child won't sit still. These are good times to give children choices. You can say, "Cara, you may sit quietly to listen to the story or go choose a book to look at on your own." "Juan, if you're finished eating, you may sit at the table to talk with your friends or go put a puzzle together."

Many adults think that giving children the choice to leave story time will mean that all the children will leave to go play. That may be the case if the story isn't interesting. But usually you'll find that some children will want to stay and listen and others will want to play. Giving children choices will mean that you'll give up some control, but those battles to make children sit still will stop. Children often behave better when they are given choices.

Prepare to give choices

Giving children choices during the day may mean that you will need to make some changes.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Who chooses what toys the children play with each day?
- Are the toys kept on low shelves, so the children can choose what they want?
- Are the books kept where children can reach them?
- Is there at least an hour of free play time set aside each day for children to choose and play what they want?
- Are there some quiet toys near the table, so children can play when they are finished eating?
- Are there some books or quiet toys for children to play with after their nap or if they can't sleep?
- Where can children go to play if they don't want to be part of a group activity?
- What choices can you give children to help plan activities for the day or week?
- Can children help to plan a lunch or snack for this week?