

Offering Children Choices

A Game Changer in the Classroom

by Angela Percival-Porter

Why would we offer children choices if, ultimately, we want them to do what we ask? When we want children to do what we want, offering them the illusion of control can influence children's behavior positively.

A typical child's day is as follows: They are told when to get up, what to wear, what to eat, when to leave, where they go, what they do when they get there, when they leave, when they get to go home, what they do when they get home, what they have for supper, when they bathe, and when they go to bed.

Giving a child options regarding things that may feel insignificant in our minds ("Do you want the blue cup or the red cup?" "You can wash your hands by yourself or I can help you," "Do you

want to hop inside or tiptoe inside?") can decrease negative behavior. In other words, we are going to drink, wash our hands, or go inside (these are not options); how do you want to do it (these are options)?

Giving the child the illusion of control subsides the pushback we get from children who are trying to be independent—which is a normal developmental stage. Of course, there will be occasions when giving them an option does not work. Then we can respond with, "If you do not choose I will choose for you." The important thing at this point is that you offer a warning. For example, "If you do not get off the table, I will help you, hold you, etc.," and you must follow through with your warning.

In addition, asking questions can be problematic. For example: "Will you pick up your shoes?" "Will you throw that away?" "Would you please help me clean up?" Often the child's answer will be "No."

As adults we have taught and modeled "no," "do not," "stop" and "quit." The best alternative for asking is stating, "I need you to ..." (For example "I need you to put your shoes

on," "Throw that away," or "Pick up the toys.") There will be times when you receive pushback. This is common and developmentally appropriate. You then can offer a choice.

Not asking children for things or saying "please" with every request will also help alleviate pushback and still allow for the illusion of control. Some parents/caregivers may not recognize the habit of asking questions. Avoid saying things such as "Are you ready for lunch?" or "Will you put your shoes on?" Remember, if it is time for lunch, it is not a request; if they need to put their shoes on then they need to put their shoes on. We can be firm and kind without asking the child questions or saying please. We can, however, absolutely thank children for making positive choices, closing the exchange on a positive and encouraging note.

Offering choices can positively affect:

- compliance,
- independence,
- initiation in work and social situations,
- social interaction,



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- communication, and
- motivation.

Consider the following scenario: You are trying to get the children in your group to come inside for lunch. Ali is on the slide and will not come down; Jose is in the sandbox crying because he does not want to go in; and Suzie has taken her shoes off and will not put them back on. Two children have complied and one is screaming that she needs to go to the bathroom. Sound familiar?

Granted, transitions are often a time of chaos, but they are going to be that way regardless of our responses to our circumstances. This is a great time to offer choices.

“Ali, I need you to come down. Do you want to slide on your pockets or belly button?”

“Suzie, you need to put your shoes on. Do you want to put the right one or left one on first?”

“Jose, it is time to go in. Do you want to be a dinosaur or a bird as we travel back to the classroom?”

Do not forget to praise the children who did line up to go in.

Not only do we want to encourage positive behavior in children by giving them a sense of control and self-efficacy with various options, we also need to realize when their behavior is simply developmentally appropriate. Many children’s behaviors that challenge the patience of adults are actually right on-target, developmentally. Sometimes children need to protest. Children’s protests are often messy and inconvenient, and they almost always come at difficult times, but they are worth listening to, because we all want to be heard and understood.

When children exert their independence, they need to feel understood. Acknowledge their feelings, help them label the feelings and comfort them. This is what all humans want—to be understood. When we are understood, our emotions and behavior calm. This is what we want for the children we serve. We desire their happiness, kindness and good behavior.

These are just a few tools to use with the children you serve. They take practice implementing and will not work with every child. Give them a few weeks with diligence and then decide with whom and how they work with the children in your care.



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<i>Not a choice:</i>	<i>State a choice:</i>
“Do you want to go in for lunch?”	“It is time for lunch. Do you want to hop or tip toe in?”
“Do you want to wash your hands for lunch?”	(What’s your alternative statement?)
“Do you want to paint?”	“
“Do you want to read?”	“
“Do you want to go outside?”	“
“Do you want to go bye-bye?”	“