Choices

You may be wondering why offering choices to children is important. The act of making choices is a life skill that is best practiced when the consequences of those choices are relatively minor (i.e., when children are still at home and school with adults who help keep them safe). Making decisions can be overwhelming, and by offering simple choices to our children, we help them build on that skill as the choices they do, and will make, become more complex. If we do not offer the opportunity for children to make choices throughout their early childhood, middle school, high school, college years, and early adulthood can become very challenging times. Young adults who have not practiced making decisions and have not experienced consequences of those decisions can be ill equipped to navigate the quick decisions that adults must make at times. Another benefit of offering choices is that children who regularly practice making decisions develop an internal locus of control; they begin to understand that they are responsible for the consequences that come as a result of the choices they make.

There are times in which adults cannot offer choices to children. Because children do not possess the inner speech that adults do, they are not able to process consequences of their choices. A child may be able to tell you that a stove is hot, but they will not be thinking through to the consequence when they reach for a hot cookie that has just come out of the oven. Situations like these pose no choice; it’s simply not safe to touch a hot stove! Another situation such as going to the grocery store is also not a choice. In this instance, it is not helpful to say, “We’re going to the grocery store, okay?” The child, hearing the “okay” might think, “No, it’s not okay. I think I’ll stay home and play with my blocks.”

It is also not beneficial to offer choices to a child when he/she is in a state of upset. If a child is in a “fight or flight” mode, he can’t hear an adult. He will need to breathe, feel calmer, and be in a place to listen. At that time, the adult can provide the child with two positive choices. These choices should be centered on what we as adults want the child TO do. For example, it is bedtime and pajamas must be on and teeth must be brushed before getting into bed. An adult might say, “It is time for bed. You may brush your teeth first or put on your pajamas first. What works for you?” The goal is to get to bed, so the choices center around what must happen prior to that. Notice that both choices are positive and acceptable to the adult. “Put your pajamas on or lose reading time” would be an example of a coercive, punitive choice. To be helpful to the child, the adult’s intent must be on how best to help the child be successful in the current situation based on his/her immediate needs.

And, what if the child does not comply? If the “No’s” continue, the adult can calmly (that’s the trick!) repeat the choices. If the child chooses, the adult will verbally respond by stating, “Look at you! You made a choice.” If the child does not make a choice, the adult may say, “I see you are having a hard time making a choice. I will help you.” At this point, the adult may choose for the child.

Other adults who overhear you offering choices might comment that it sounds as though parents are pandering or bargaining with their children. In these cases, it can be helpful to state that you are teaching your child how to make choices. In reality, children are far more likely to achieve success when they are in control of how they follow through on a task or activity.

Learning how to make decisions is a lifelong skill! As with any other skill such as reading, math, or music, the more we practice, the more comfortable we become with this skill. Offering choices, and supporting our children in their decision making and subsequent consequences is a valuable investment in their sense of self.

Wishing you days filled with opportunities to offer positive choices to your children.