

# Give and take: Foster cooperation through choices

Most of the conflicts we have with our preschool-age children involve getting them to do something they don't want to do in a reasonable amount of time. Eating, getting dressed, going to bed or taking a bath may be familiar conflict areas. In parenting class, I was introduced to the idea of giving choices to avoid conflict. When we give choices, or freedom within limits, we can help our children feel in control of themselves, foster cooperation and develop independence.

How and when to present choices are critical to the success of implementing this concept. If we give too many choices, we may create an environment of frustration and again encounter lack of cooperation.

Giving few choices, we risk being authoritarian and may create rebellion or subterfuge in our children.

The art of implementation is looking at each child and situation with fresh and understanding eyes, while remaining kind and firm.

Everyday was a struggle to brush my two-and-a-half-year-old's teeth. Hannah lacked the fine motor control to do the job alone and resisted mightily when I tried.

I was totally frustrated, and bedtime was a disaster.

At our dental check-up, I mentioned to Dr. Jim about our brushing conflict.

"Hannah," Dr. Jim inquired. "Why are you fighting with your mom about brushing your teeth?"

"The toothpaste burns my mouth."

"Let's try some different flavors. I have cinnamon, bubblegum, peppermint and strawberry. Which one do you want to taste first?"

Hannah cheerfully sampled each flavor and selected a tube. That was the end of our Battle of the Brush. I remain thankful to Dr. Jim for lowering my stress level twenty points with bubblegum flavored



toothpaste. I hadn't considered giving Hannah a choice of toothpaste. I hadn't even thought to ask her why she was upset.

Years later, I witnessed my friend, Martha, go overboard with choices.

"Jimmy, would you like oatmeal or eggs for breakfast?"

"Oatmeal."

"Do you want blueberry, strawberry, cinnamon or maple flavor?"

"Cinnamon."

"Do you want brown sugar or honey?"

"Honey."

"Do you want butter or milk on it?"

"Milk."



Maren Schmidt

Kids Talk™

"Do you want it in the white or the blue bowl? Do you want apple, grape or orange juice?"

Poor Jimmy. This two-year-old was interrogated for breakfast. After the third question, I watched Jimmy's eyes glaze. When the blue bowl arrived, Jimmy gave his mother "a look" and then dumped his oatmeal on the table.

"Giving choices just isn't working," Martha lamented.

I observed that giving too many choices doesn't work. Martha

should have stopped at oatmeal! Question after question turned a picky eater into a rebel.

When a child is defiant, he is asking us, "Who is the boss here? You act like it's me. If it's you, then show me."

Don't be afraid of showing your child that defiant behavior is unacceptable. He is asking for limits to be set and enforced. Too many choices can cause a child to question his role in the parent/child relationship. Our children need for us to be the adults in charge, so they can feel safe and secure.

We also need to be on guard for giving choices that aren't appropriate. Dawn thought that giving her



## Parenting Tip

four-year-old daughter, Sophie, a choice about what time to go to bed would make bedtime smoother. In reality, bedtime was not negotiable for Dawn, as Sophie thought her choice was no bedtime. Chaos and unhappiness ensued. Dawn realized she needed to set and enforce bedtime.

The choices Dawn gave Sophie were decisions such as what color pajamas to wear, what books to read and what prayers to say. When Dawn set the limits regarding time and then gave Sophie freedom within those limits, bedtime became calmer. Sophie understood her limits and the freedom she had within those limits. Bedtime became a loving ritual instead of a power struggle.

Allowing choices fosters self-control, cooperation and independence in our children. Be aware of giving too many or inappropriate choices.

When your child gets to those bumpy teenage years, he or she will have many years of practicing how to make "good" choices. You'll be able to feel confident in your teenager's ability to continue to make "good" choices when dealing with tough decisions with friends, drugs and alcohol.

*Kids Talk™ is an award-winning column dealing with childhood development issues written by Maren Stark Schmidt, M.Ed. She has more than 25 years experience working with young children and is the author of Understanding Montessori: A Guide for Parents. Contact her via e-mail at maren@kidstalknews.*