

Offer Freedom Within Limits



Many of the difficult situations we have with our children involves 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.

When we give our children choices we can avoid conflict.

These choices, or freedom within limits, help our children feel in control of themselves, foster cooperation and develop independence.

How and when to present choices is critical to the success of implementing this concept.

Give too many choices and we may create an environment of frustration and again encounter non-cooperation. Offering 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.

Years ago, I witnessed my friend, Diane, go overboard with choices.

Tommy, do you want to wear your blue shirt or your green shirt?

My green shirt.

Do you want your blue pants or your khaki pants?

Khaki.

Do you want to wear your sandals or your running shoes?

Sandals.

Socks or no socks?

Blue striped or green striped?

After the third question I watched three-year-old Tommy's eyes start to flame.

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When Diane started to help Tommy take off his pajamas he pulled away and ran into the other room, yelling “I don’t want to get dressed. I hate those clothes.”

“This giving choices thing isn’t working for me,” Diane said.

Giving too many choices doesn’t work, is what I observed.

Question after question turned an initially cooperative child into a rebel. Perhaps a simple choice of this green outfit or this blue outfit would have been enough decision making.

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 adult in charge, so they can feel safe and secure.

We also need to be on guard for making non-negotiable actions sound like choices.

- Do you want to hold my hand while we cross the street? Or, do you want to hold my right hand or left hand when we cross the street?
- Do you want to take a bath? Or do you want blue bubble bath or green bubble bath in the tub tonight?
- Do you want me to set a curfew for you? Or do you want to help me decide what time your curfew should be? You decide.

Adding the phrase, *you decide*, helps the child be aware of the decision-making process and helps the child feel empowered.

In truth, there are many choices that we can’t allow our children to make, but there are many we can encourage when we practice freedom within limits. 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 making “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, alcohol and more.