

CHILD-PARENT-RELATIONSHIP (C-P-R) TRAINING

Advanced Choice Giving: Providing Choices as Consequences—Sessions 6-7

Children need parental guidance and discipline. In many instances, parents must make decisions for children—decisions that children are not mature enough to take responsibility for—such as bedtime, other matters of health and safety, and compliance with household policies and rules. However, parents can provide their children with some measure of control in the situation by providing choices. Parents are reminded of the importance of connecting with their child and being sensitive to their emotional state when giving choices or limiting behavior. Remember the Rule of Thumb: “When a child is drowning, don't try to teach her to swim.” When children are feeling upset or out of control, they have difficulty hearing choices and consequences. First connect and help calm your child (co-regulate through reflecting child's feelings in soothing voice), then provide choice or wait until a later time.

Oreo® Cookie Method of Choice Giving (from *Choices, Cookies, & Kids* video by Dr. Garry Landreth)

Example 1: Three-year-old Isabella is clutching a handful of Oreo® cookies, ready to eat them all (it is right before bedtime, and the parent knows it would not be healthy for Isabella to have all the cookies. But Isabella does not know that—she just knows that she wants cookies!): **“Isabella, you can choose to keep one of the cookies to eat and put the rest back, or you can put all of the cookies back—which do you choose?”** Or, if it is permissible to the parent for Isabella to have two cookies: **“Isabella, you can have one cookie or two—which do you choose?”**

Example 2: Six-year-old Oliver does not want to take his medicine and adamantly tells you so! Taking the medicine is not a choice—that is a given. But the parent can provide the child with some choice in the situation by saying, **“Oliver, you can choose to have apple juice or orange juice with your medicine—which do you choose?”**

Example 3: Eight-year-old Omar is tired and cranky and refuses to get in the car to go home from Grandma and Grandpa's house. **“Omar, you can choose to sit in the middle row by Daddy, or you can choose to sit in the back seat with Selin—which do you choose?”**

Choice Giving to Enforce Household Policies and Rules

Choice giving can be used to enforce household policies/rules. Begin by working on one at a time. In general, provide two choices—one is phrased positively (consequence for complying with policy), and the other choice (consequence for not complying with policy) is stated as a consequence that you believe your child would not prefer (such as giving up favorite TV show). Consequence for noncompliance should be relevant and logical rather than punitive, and it must be **enforceable**.

Example: A household rule has been established that toys in the family room must be picked up off the floor before dinner (children cannot seem to remember without being told repeatedly, and parent is feeling frustrated with constant reminders and power struggles).

“We are about to institute a new and significant policy within the confines of this domicile” (big words get children's attention!). **“When you choose to pick up your toys before dinner, you choose to watch 30 minutes of television after dinner. When you choose not to pick up your toys before dinner, you choose not to watch television after dinner.”** *Note: Be sure to let children know when there are 10-15 minutes before dinner, so they have time to pick up their toys.*

Children may be unable to comply the first time you announce this new policy, because you have just informed them. But what is important is that you begin to allow your children to use their internal resources and self-control to remember the new policy without constant reminders. (Remember that the new policy was implemented because you were frustrated and tired of nagging!) So, the second night, parent says, "**Joaquin and Jamal, dinner will be ready in 10 minutes; it is time to pick up your toys.**" Parent walks out. When it is time for dinner, parent goes back into room to announce dinner:

- a. The toys have not been picked up—say nothing at that moment. After dinner, go back into family room and announce to children, "**Looks like you decided to not watch television tonight.**" Even if children get busy picking up the toys, they have already chosen not to watch TV for this night. "**Oh, you're thinking that if you pick your toys up now that you can watch TV, but the policy is that toys have to be put away before dinner.**" After children plead for another chance, *follow through on the consequence*, calmly and empathically stating: "**I know that you wish you would have chosen to put your toys away before dinner, so you could choose to watch TV now. Tomorrow night, you can choose to put your toys away before dinner and choose to watch TV.**" *Some children will choose not to watch TV for several nights in a row!*
- b. The children are busy picking up toys and have put most of them away. Parent says (as she helps with the few remaining toys to demonstrate spirit of cooperation and prevent delay of dinner), "**It's time for dinner—looks like you've chosen to watch TV after dinner tonight.**"

Guidelines for Choice Giving in Relation to Limit Setting and Consequences

- Enforce consequence **without fail** and **without anger**.
- Consequence is for "today" only—*each day (or play session) should be a chance for a fresh start; a chance to have learned from the previous decision and resulting consequence; a chance to use internal resources to control "self" and make a different decision.*
- **Reflect** child's choice with empathy, but remain firm. Consistency and follow-through are critical!
- **Communicate** choices in a matter-of-fact voice—power struggles are likely to result if child hears frustration or anger in parent's voice and believes parent is invested in one choice over another. Child must be free to choose consequence for noncompliance.

Caution: *Once your child has reached the stage of "out of control," your child may not be able to hear and process a choice. Take a step back and focus on your child's feelings, reflecting their feelings empathically while limiting unacceptable behavior.*

Remember the oxygen mask analogy: You (parent) must remain calm and relational during choice giving/limit setting in order for child to perceive that they do have a genuine choice in the situation and avoid power struggle. Parent remains calm, neutral, and relational. You want your child to be successful in choosing!