

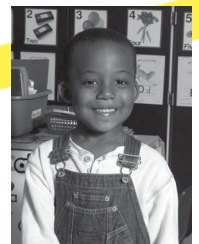
Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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Using Choice and Preference to Promote Improved Behavior

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15

SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS



Using Choice and Preference to Promote Improved Behavior

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. In-service

providers and others who conduct staff development activities should find them especially useful in sharing information with professionals and parents. The Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

Alex’s Story

Alex is a 4-year-old boy in Mr. Anderson’s preschool class who is happiest when he is out on the playground in the sandbox. Although Mr. Anderson has tried to get Alex to follow directions and use toys and materials appropriately during small group activities such as art, Alex does not comply with the classroom rules. He never seems to want to sit down with the rest of the class and participate. He seems uninterested in every art project, and Mr. Anderson has a difficult time keeping Alex’s attention. Instead, Alex prefers to wander around the room. If Mr. Anderson does get him to sit still long enough to give him the art materials, Alex usually throws or pushes them off the table. Mr. Anderson has tried allowing Alex to play while the other children complete art projects, but he really wants Alex to participate. Mr. Anderson has also tried sitting behind Alex and helping him use the materials by giving him hand-over-hand guidance. Alex usually fights the whole time and sometimes hits and kicks Mr. Anderson. Time-out has not worked either; because Alex doesn’t want to be at the art table, he is happy to go sit by himself. Mr. Anderson is ready to give up. Conversations with Alex’s parents reveal that similar behaviors occur at home.

What Is the Choice-Making Strategy?

Offering choices to children involves allowing them to indicate their preference at specific points in time and throughout their day and then giving them access to the items or activities they choose. Choices can be offered in countless settings, including meals, chores, centers, routines, and play. Types of choices may include choosing materials during an activity, choosing what activity will come next, and choosing a friend to sit with at lunch. The intervention consists of offering choices among two or more types of materials or activities. Depending upon the child’s ability level, choices can be offered verbally (“Do you want juice or milk?”), using actual objects (showing the child a juice box or milk carton and asking the question), or using picture representations, such as a menu board of pictures (actual photos or drawings of the milk and juice cartons) from which the child can make a choice. In the above example, Mr. Anderson might offer Alex a choice of colored construction paper and various glitter glue sticks to use on his art project.

Why Is It Important to Offer Choices to Children?

Children tend to be more cooperative, more engaged, and better behaved when they are involved with activities, materials, and individuals that they enjoy. Therefore, teachers, parents, and other caregivers can promote improved behavior by providing children access to preferred toys, materials, activities, and even social partners. If it is difficult to determine a child’s preferences, one can ask parents and others who are very familiar with the child, or one can observe the child’s reactions and engagement when he or she is using various items or activities and when he or she is playing with different children. It is also helpful to consider the items that the child is naturally drawn to or seeks out when given the opportunity.

This intervention seems to be effective for situations when choices are offered both within activities (such as choosing a color of crayon to use during art or choosing

a peer to sit next to during group) and between activities (such as choosing between two centers). Although several explanations for the effectiveness of this strategy have been suggested, evidence suggests that choice making is effective because it allows the child to feel that he or she has some control or power over the environment. This control, in turn, motivates the child to participate and remain engaged longer.

Children who have few interests may also benefit from the opportunity to make choices.

What Resources Are Needed?

Few or no additional resources are needed to use this choice-making intervention. In some cases, it may be necessary to invest in toys or other materials that are especially attractive to a particular child. It also may be necessary to create a “choice board” using pictures, symbols, or icons. It may be useful to laminate the board or increase the board’s flexibility with fasteners that can be attached or removed. Photos or other images used should depict only the item of interest, with as little background distraction as possible. Actual cutouts from boxes (such as the cardboard cereal or toy box) are generally reliable visual sources for children. The number of pictures presented on the choice board should be determined based on the child’s skill level; fewer choice options are preferred for young children or children whose cognitive skills are less advanced. The number of choices can be increased over time as the child becomes familiar with the strategy.

Who Are the Children Who Benefit from This Intervention?

Children who benefit most directly from this intervention are those who display problem behaviors to escape participation in activities or avoid using materials that they find relatively unappealing, undesirable, or difficult. Much of the research has been conducted with children who have disabilities, but some studies demonstrate the effectiveness of choice making with children without disabilities as well. Generally, any child with or without disabilities who has low levels of engagement or motivation is a good candidate for the choice-making strategy. Children who have few interests may also benefit from the opportunity to make choices. Most of the relevant research has been done with 4- and 5-year-olds in classrooms (elementary and preschool), but some of the research was conducted in

homes and clinics. The importance of adapting this strategy to meet the unique needs of the children and families in a teacher’s care cannot be overstated.

What Behavioral Changes Can Be Expected?

Decreases in the amount of acting-out behavior and increases in engagement can be expected, and often these changes happen relatively quickly after the intervention has been implemented. Research has also shown that other challenging behaviors, including aggression and disruption, have been positively affected by the choice-making strategy. Other benefits include positive effects on:

- compliance
- independence
- initiations in work and social situations
- social interactions
- communication
- motivation

As with most strategies, the overall effectiveness of this strategy will be different for each child. For some children, the effects may be great, and for others, it may be somewhat less substantial.

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Alex’s Story Revisited

A later look in Mr. Anderson’s classroom shows that Alex has made good progress. Now that Mr. Anderson gives him choices within activities, such as what color clay to use or which scissors to cut with, Alex is more interested in working. Alex feels that he has a bit more control over his environment, so he is more motivated to stay on task. Making choices also helps Alex better understand what is expected of him during activities. As a result, he is wandering less and is rarely disruptive. Mr. Anderson plans to continue offering choices to all of his students in a variety of classroom situations.



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.



Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources.

There are several resources available for learning how to implement choice in classroom settings. Note that some strategies are effective regardless of the age of the child, but others should be implemented on an age-appropriate basis only.

Jolivet, K., Stichter, J. P., & McCormick, K. M. (2002). Making choices, improving behavior, engaging in learning. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34(3), 24-29.

Kelman, A. (1990). Choices for children. *Young Children*, 45(3), 42-45.

McCormick, K. M., Jolivet, K., & Ridgley, R. (2003). Choice making as an intervention strategy for young children. *Young Exceptional Children*, 6(2), 3-10.

McNairy, M. R. (1985). Decision-making for young children: A study of a teacher's use of choice in the context of the classroom. *Early Child Development and Care*, 21(1-3), 61-81.

Pavia, L. S., & DaRos, D. (1997). Choice: A powerful tool in caring for toddlers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 25(1), 67-69.



What is the Scientific Basis for the Practice?

For those wishing to learn more about the topic, the following resources provide more information:

Cole, C. L., & Levinson, T. R. (2002). Effects of within-activity choices on the challenging behavior of children with severe developmental disabilities. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 4(1), 29-37.

Dunlap, G., DePerczel, M., Clarke, S., Wilson, D., Wright, S., White, R., & Gomez, A. (1994). Choice making to promote adaptive behavior for students with emotional and behavioral challenges. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 27(3), 505-518.

Kern, L., Vorndran, C. M., Hilt, A., Ringdahl, J. E., Adelman, B. E., & Dunlap, G. (1998). Choice as an intervention to improve behavior: A review of the literature. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 8(2), 151-170.

Koegel, R. L., Dyer, K., & Bell, L. K. (1987). The influence of child-preferred activities on autistic children's social behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 20(3), 243-252.

Waldron-Soler, K. M., Martella, R. C., Marchand-Martella, N. E., & Ebey, T. L. (2000). Effects of choice of stimuli as reinforcement for task responding in preschoolers with and without developmental disabilities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 33(1), 93-96.

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