

LIMITED CHOICES

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Learning to make healthy and appropriate choices begins early! Waiting until adolescence to allow children to make their own choices is a recipe for disaster. In order for children to develop a healthy boundaries and a sense of appropriate autonomy, they need practice making choices, and a safe environment in which to make them.

Self-control is not just an innate ability. It is learned, and like most skills, it is learned through experience. Don't wait until your child is rebelling to start caving in and giving choices that are inappropriate. Start by giving them choices from an early age.

Limited choices are the best way to do this. A *limited choice* is a choice between two or more appropriate (developmentally, socially and behaviorally) and acceptable alternatives. *Appropriate*, in this case, means developmentally, socially or morally appropriate. For instance, it's not a developmentally appropriate decision for a child to go to sleep whenever they want or not take their medicine. It would be developmentally appropriate to give them a choice of whether they want to hear one story or two before bed, or whether they want to brush their teeth before or after the story. It wouldn't be a developmentally appropriate decision for a teenager to decide when their curfew was, but certainly they can participate in the decision making process so as not to incite rebellion. *Acceptable* means acceptable to both you and the child. If you say, "You need to go to soccer practice or quit soccer," or "Make your lunch or go without today," be sure that you can live with either choice. If you can't, don't give the choice. It is important to note, here, that acceptable to a child doesn't mean that they have to like the choices being offered (although it is helpful) just that the decisions are reasonable and not veiled threats. So, for instance, a choice between doing the dishes and being sent to your room is a veiled threat and not a choice.

Limited choices allow for children to participate in the decision making while allowing the adult to maintain appropriate and reasonable boundaries. As children get older, more competent and experienced, the boundaries are broader. Here are some examples:

For a young child, ages 3-5:

- "Would you like to walk to the car or skip to the car? You choose."
- "Would you like to carry your own toy or leave it in the car? You choose."
- "What would you like for breakfast, eggs or oatmeal? You choose."

For children, ages 6-12:

- "Would you like to make your bed before or after breakfast?"
- "What job would you like after dinner, wiping the table down or sweeping the floor?"
- "When would you like to do your homework, before dinner or before TV time?"

For children, ages 13-18:

- “Let’s discuss some ideas for a curfew that would work for you and for us.”
- “You are welcome to come with us if you wear an outfit that would be appropriate for the occasion or you may stay home. Let me know what you decide.”
- “I have to get myself ready for work. You can pack your own lunch or use your allowance to buy lunch at school, but you’re responsible for that decision. I trust you’ll figure it out.”

Not offering choices and opportunities to make decisions invites rebellion or dependence. Offering too many choices, without limits, invites a false sense of entitlement or insecurity. Offering limited choices is one of the most powerful tools to use in helping children to make decisions while learning to navigate boundaries and limitations – long term, life skills. It is also an incredibly effective way for developing our relationship with our children, increasing connection, cooperation and sense of trust. As a parent, I have also found that modeling this behavior also has taught my children how to set clear boundaries, but include others in decision making.

A few years ago, my oldest son, Quinn, was asked to help put his younger brother, Nicholas, to bed by reading him a story. My younger son was not happy with this idea, as he was used to my wife or I reading to him before bed, and was quite vocal about his displeasure. In turn, Quinn looked at him and said, “Nicholas, I’m going to read you a story. Do you want to go upstairs by hopping like a bunny or slithering like a snake?” Nicholas was pensive for a moment, and then replied, “I’m going to slither like a snake.” And away he slid.