

# FamilyEducation

## Teach Your Child How to Make Choices

Teaching your child to make choices is element number six of the [Twelve Disciplinary Elements](#) and it's one of the most *important* elements of raising a well-behaved, resourceful child.

Let's talk about choice for a moment.

I love science-fiction stories that deal with alternate choices ("The Fork in the Road Not Taken" stories), where the hero or heroine suddenly is plunged into an alternate reality—a reality that could have happened had he or she made a different choice of action somewhere, sometime, before. That theme always points out to me how *much* choice we have in life. From big choices ("Should I take the big PR job and move to New York or go back to the land and become an herb farmer?") to little choices ("Ice cream or salad?"), every move we make has ramifications.

### How Do Choices Prevent Problems?

Part of being self-disciplined is understanding and taking responsibility for making life's choices. Helping your children learn the difficult skill of making positive, appropriate choices is a big part of parenting well. A child who is skilled at consciously making choices will understand her own needs, and gain a sense of control over her own life. Choice-making also helps teach internal discipline, organization, and prioritizing. (You're not going to have a lot of problems from a kid this empowered.)

Children learn how to make big choices by watching you do it, and by gaining experience through making little choices. Here are some tips about teaching choice to your child:

- *Never give a choice you aren't willing to follow through on.* That means if you say, "Either you clean your room or we are not going out to dinner tonight," you should be prepared to start cooking. It also means if you say, "Clean your room and I'll take you to the fanciest restaurant in town," you need to be prepared to pick up that phone and start making reservations.
- *It's your responsibility to keep your child safe and healthy.* Keep food choices healthy, and allow your child to choose what to eat. If your kid chooses to eat only cookies and ice cream, stop having them as a choice.
- *Unless your child is very skilled at choice-making and your budget is unlimited, never offer choices without parameters.* Give them an "either/or" if they are young, or up to several options if they are older. You're looking for trouble (and you're not teaching choice) if you say, "You can choose where we're going on vacation," or "Whatever you want for dessert, it's your choice." (Whee! We're going to Bora Bora to eat a carload of chocolate mousse topped with champagne cream and gilded with gold leaf!)
- *When a child is making choices about her behavior, you can point out the choice and the consequences of it.* "Jonah, I notice you have chosen to play Nintendo before dinner instead of doing your homework. I hope you are aware that you have chosen to stay home and finish your homework tonight instead of going to the movies with your friend Jeremy."
- *Older children can use choices to learn how to prioritize.* You can say, "Your laundry needs to be in the hamper, Rex needs a walk, and your book report is due tomorrow. You can choose how you arrange to get it all done." (You might add, "If you would like some help organizing your time, I'll be happy to take a couple of minutes with you at any point this evening.")
- *Once a child makes a choice, lay off on the options, don't continue to offer choices.* ("Well, maybe not Bora Bora, perhaps Kathmandu.") That's what a choice is, it's a decision. It's part of choosing to live with all the ramifications.

- *Once a choice has been made, be clear as to when it becomes final.* (“The special price on those discount tickets expires at midnight, so we need to be prepared to buy before bedtime.”)

Which brings us to the question, What if your child doesn't like her choice? That can be hard for a wimpy parent to watch. It can even be hard for a strong, reasonable parent to watch. Nobody enjoys watching a child be disappointed. But making a choice entails learning to live with the choice that's been made. Don't “rescue” your child from her experiences; it may make her feel better in the long run, but it ultimately won't teach her anything at all. Disappointment is a good teaching tool, and discipline is teaching.

### **Behave Yourself!**

Why so negative? It's better to plan for success, rather than failure (It's been said that people who expect success are more likely to achieve it than people who expect to fail). Provide choices that will work for your child.

### **It's a Good Idea!**

Take a deep breath, step back, and trust your child's choices. He is learning what he wants, needs, and values—these things can't be forced. Model your values, then let your little bird fly.

## **Choice Expands with Age**

As an adult, you have free choice about many aspects of life. You've earned that. Children start out unable to handle anything but the simplest choices. Think of the challenge faced by the kid in the ice-cream shop: “Chocolate or vanilla?” As kids get older, the choices become more complex, and they should.

### **Free Choice?**

No matter what you say, do, or try to control, your child does have choices. Yes, they can be restricted choices, but your child can *always* choose noncompliance. I say it's better to provide a variety of choices instead of letting the extreme choice of noncompliance be a child's only option. You'll do best and be happier when you embrace choice and learn how to work *with it* (since it exists, you might as well make it work for you). When choices and the choice-making process are made explicit, there is less room for misunderstandings to occur.

## **Choice Builds Strength**

The world has its dangers, and try as you might, you cannot protect your child from all of them. A child's best defense is the ability to make safe, wise choices, and this is a skill that takes practice. Help your child by guiding her through the choice making process. That's really all you can do, and that's often more than enough.