

Choice-Making: Introduction

Choice-making is an intervention strategy that can reduce problem behaviors, increase motivation and develop personal freedom.

Think About It ...

Think of all the choices you make in your daily life. Every day you make many decisions: probably decide what time you want to wake up, whether you want to eat cereal for breakfast or have toast and coffee. You probably even decide if you are going to read the newspaper or watch television before you head off to work. Imagine, for a moment, what your life would be like if you were not allowed to make any of these seemingly easy decisions for yourself. Think of the freedom and control you would lose over your own life. Unfortunately, this is what many individuals with cognitive impairments and developmental, physical and behavioral disorders, such as autistic spectrum disorders, experience every single day! Individuals with disabilities often lack the skills necessary to make choices. As a result, choice-making opportunities are nonexistent or very limited for these individuals.

Remember ...

Anyone who has the desire to help individuals with disabilities can teach choice-making skills and provide choice-making opportunities, thereby giving these individuals more freedom and control over their lives.

What Is Choice-Making?

According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, choice is "the power or opportunity of making a selection" (p. 144). Many individuals with disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders lack the "power or opportunities" necessary to make decisions about what will happen to them. In other words, they do not get to choose how they would like to participate in their own lives.

Researchers have determined that the choice-making process consists of the following three levels:

1. Preferences: Our likes and dislikes.

Example: Maggie enjoys snack time. She loves the peanut butter crackers, but she doesn't like dried fruit. It is important to determine preferences based on observed behavior.

2. Choice-making within limitations: Our ability to make choices with specific constraints.

Example: Maggie makes the decision to eat the crackers but not the dried fruit. However, she would not be given the opportunity to eat all the peanut butter crackers.

3. Expression of autonomy: Our individuality.

Example: Maggie is who she is based on her preferences and her ability to communicate her decisions and choices. Because she has the ability to choose what she wants to eat, she is in a sense expressing her individuality.

Individuals with developmental delays and disabilities often face barriers in making decisions for themselves. Some of these include:

- Not being taught how to make choices
- Limited opportunities to express preferences and make choices
- Limited communication skills

Ways to Combat the Barriers to Effective Choice-Making

Teach choice-making skills.

Individuals must be given tools to effectively define and communicate their likes and dislikes. Choices can range from the simple, such as choosing between two assignments, to the complex, such as deciding the type of after-school chores they would like to do. Whether the choice is simple or complex, it is essential first to determine the needs of the individual and teach choice-making skills according to his or her preferences.

Provide opportunities to use choice-making skills.

Opportunities to choose allows individuals with disabilities to gain control and independence. Opportunities to make choices are available every day at home, school, and within the community. It is important to recognize that choices are available and encourage individuals to express their preferences related to the available choices.

Acknowledge all forms of communication.

Any attempt at communication should be acknowledged, including nonverbal communication such as reaching, touching, eye gaze, facial gestures, vocalization, body movement, and sign language. Augmentative and alternative communication devices such as switches, buttons, picture choice books, and other visual aids may be used to improve or enhance the communication of individual choices.

Why Is Choice-Making Important?

Allowing individuals to express their preferences is a positive step toward gaining personal freedom. Choice-making is important because it can reduce or prevent problem behaviors, prepare learners for independence, increase motivation, prevent [learned helplessness](#), and increase attention to task.

- **Choice may reduce or prevent problem behaviors**
Studies have shown that inappropriate behavior such as [aggression](#), [self-injury](#), [object misuse](#), [tantrums](#), and [social avoidance](#) may be reduced through the use of choice-making. Many times, individuals display inappropriate behavior because they have been forced to do something they do not want to do. Choice-making is a non-aversive technique that allows the individual to control a situation in a positive way rather than a negative way, such as hitting.
- **Choice offers independence**
The ability to make choices is directly linked to personal independence, dignity and self-worth. When individuals express their choices based on their preferences, they are making independent decisions.
- **Choice increases motivation**
Having choices and decision-making opportunities can provide a sense of accomplishment. This feeling of accomplishment, in turn, increases motivation and desire to be more productive.
- **Choice can prevent learned helplessness**
Learned helplessness is thought to result from a belief that nothing that one does makes a difference. As a result, individuals displaying learned helplessness are unmotivated to try and gradually lose self-esteem. However, by having choices, they discover that choosing can make a difference in how they feel about themselves.
- **Choice increases attention to task**
When students have opportunities to state preferences and make decisions, they become more interested in the activity. Thus, increased interest in a specific subject can have a positive effect on attention.

What Are the Goals of Teaching Choice-Making?

- **Goal #1:** Teach learners how to clearly communicate their selection to others. Individuals communicate choice selection in a variety of ways such as verbalizing, signing or gesturing, and/or pointing or reaching for a desired option.
- **Goal #2:** Teach learners that selections will result in a [preferred outcome](#). Learners need to understand that their choices can impact their environment.
- **Goal #3:** Teach sophisticated choice-making skills and expand choice opportunities. This gives learners a greater feeling of control.

It's Time to Prepare for Choice-Making Opportunities! - Before teaching choice-making, it is important to prepare for how choice opportunities will be presented. This process involves the following four steps.

Step 1: Select choice options based on "learner likes." Do this by identifying two or three pairs of items taken from daily routines that the learner enjoys. Mealtimes, leisure, or self-care activities are great starting places!

- Sometimes it is difficult to determine learner likes if choice-making skills are not present. So try to find out what the learner prefers by observing his or her reactions to everyday events.

Example: Maggie gets excited when we have pizza for dinner, but she never willingly eats when we have hamburgers.

- Reaching for an item, looking at an item or even smiling may indicate a preferred object or activity. Conversely, movement away from an object, resistance to an activity, or a facial grimace may signal a dislike of certain materials or activities.

Example: Maggie goes directly to her books when she enters her playroom. She runs away when I try to do puzzles with her.

- Now that you know the learner's likes and dislikes, you need to form two or three choice pairs. Choice pairs consist of one option that the learner likes well and another enjoyable option related to that same activity or routine.

Example: Maggie really likes to play with makeup and she likes to brush her hair too. These items would make up one choice pair.

- Choice pairs should be as visually and textually different as possible to ensure that the learner can tell them apart.

Example: Milk and orange juice would be good choice pairs because they are both related to mealtimes but look very different, and therefore are easily distinguishable.

Step 2: Identify and define how the learner will signal her choice. Make sure you consistently teach the learner to use the same choice response across all choices.

- Choice responses should always be:
 - Under voluntary control
 - Easily performed
 - Readily recognizable to others
 - Capable of being physically prompted if necessary

Example: "When presented with two choices, Maggie will indicate her choice by pointing to one of the items."

Step 3: In this step you choose routine activities during which you can present the choice pairs. Typically, the types of activities chosen are determined by the nature of the choice pairs.

Example: *Good times to present Maggie with choices at home would be during dinner and her bedtime routine. Food-related choices should be presented during mealtimes or snacktime and grooming-related choices should be presented before bed.*

Step 4: In the last step of preparation you plan how to present choice opportunities. Remember, the same choice pair is presented several times within one routine. With this in mind, the following two options are suggested:

- Present small portions of an option at a time. When the item is used up, present an opportunity for choice.

Example: *We presented Maggie with really small pieces of graham crackers. That way she got to practice choosing graham cracker a lot. When each piece was gone, she could ask for more.*

- Start an activity, then stop it. Before restarting the activity, present a choice opportunity.

Example: *My mom brushes Maggie's hair for three strokes and then stops. Then Maggie chooses her brush and my mom brushes three more strokes.*

Teaching Choice-Making Skills - Following these eight steps will teach individuals how to make independent and purposeful choices.

Step 1: To identify choice options, let the learner sample the choice options. If the choice options are edible, let the learner taste each item. If the choice options are activities, model part of the activity. Note: Do not teach choice-making immediately after this process.

Example: *Maggie is choosing between crackers and cookies. We encourage her to taste each type before we offer her a choice.*

Step 2: Here is your first teaching opportunity! Offer the choice options to the learner by placing or holding the two options in front of the learner.

Example: *I put a small piece of cracker and a small piece of cookie on the table. I put them right in front of Maggie to be sure she could see them.*

Remember, when you are teaching beginning choice-making, it is best to use the actual objects when presenting choice options. Once the learner has mastered these beginning steps (criteria for mastery are discussed later), you can expand choice and control by using a wide array of choice option formats, including photographs, picture icons, and choice boards or books.

Step 3: Ask the learner, "Do you want _____ or _____ ?"

Example: *"Maggie, do you want cracker or cookie?"*

Step 4: Wait 10 to 15 seconds for the learner to make an independent choice response.

Example: *After 5 seconds, Maggie reached toward the cookie.*

Step 5: Respond immediately by giving the individual the chosen option. Remove the other item and praise the learner for making the selection.

Example: *I gave Maggie the cookie right away and put the cracker out of her sight. Then I told her what a great job she had done choosing the cookie.*

Step 6: If the learner does not make an independent choice response, prompt the choice response. Choose the level of prompt that results in the learner making a choice response every time. Use the same prompt across all choice opportunities. Prompts can be given in the following three forms:

Verbal

Example: "Maggie, point to cracker or cookie."

Model

Example: I touched the item that I wanted.

Physical

Example: I helped guide Maggie's hand to point to the one of the options.

Step 7: If the learner rejects an option after making a choice, repair the situation by removing the unwanted item immediately. Do not force the individual to engage in an unwanted activity.

Example: *Maggie chose cracker, but then pushed it away when I gave it to her. I quickly took the cracker away.*

Step 8: To give other choice opportunities, repeat the previous steps. It is not necessary that the individual sample each item after the initial choice has been made. Also, it is important to vary the position (left to right) of the choice options each time.

Example: *I wanted Maggie to have the chance to choose more pieces of the cookie, so I switched their position on the table and asked, "Do you want cracker or a cookie?"*

How Can I Provide Choice-Making Opportunities Throughout the Day?

Choice options can be broken down into seven categories. The Model of Choice Diversity (Brown, Belz, Corsi, & Wenig, 1993) lists these choice options as follows:

- Between Activities (choice among different activities)
- Within Activities (choice of materials for a given activity)
- Refusal (choice to refuse an activity)
- Who (choice of the person the learner wants to work with)
- Where (choice of the location of the activity)
- When (choice of what time the activity will occur)
- Terminate (choice to end an activity)

Read the following example to see how easy it is to overlook opportunities for choice-making!:

It was bath time. The only option Maggie was given was the choice between the bathtub or the shower. Although a choice is provided, it has been limited in at least seven ways:

1. If Maggie wanted to use the purple soap instead of blue soap, her within activities choice was denied.
2. If Maggie wanted to have a snack at this time instead of bathing, choosing between activities was denied.
3. If Maggie did not want to bathe at all, her choice to refuse was denied.

4. If Maggie wanted to get out of the bath before shampooing her hair, her choice to terminate the activity was denied.
5. If Maggie wanted to her mom to help her instead of her big sister, her choice of with whom to participate was denied.
6. If Maggie wanted to bathe in her mom's bathtub, her choice of where the activity occurred was denied.
7. If Maggie wanted to take a bath at a later time, her choice of when was denied.

Where Can I Implement Choice-Making?

Choice-making opportunities should be made available throughout the day. Think about the types of routines that the individual typically engages in. Examples include getting ready for school, arriving at school, taking a trip to the library, and getting ready for bed. These routines can all be categorized according to where they take place at home, at school, or in the community. Let's take a look at specific examples of choices that can be given in each setting.

When Should I Provide Choice Options at Home?

Choice opportunities can be made available during many at-home routines. Some examples are listed below.

- when waking up/getting dressed
- during breakfast
- when arriving home from school or work
- during leisure time
- while preparing for dinner
- during chores
- while getting ready for bed

Once you have identified routines to target with your learner, identify the activities associated with each routine to determine appropriate choice options.

Example: During Maggie's morning routine, associated activities would include making her bed, brushing her teeth, getting dressed, and packing her backpack.

See how a specific activity within Maggie's morning routine –brushing teeth– was broken down into individual steps. This makes it easier to determine the choice options that may be presented within an activity.

Activity: Brushing Teeth

<u>Steps of the Activity</u>	<u>Choice Option Presented</u>
1. Picks up toothbrush	1. Would you like to use the purple or the blue toothbrush?
2. Gets toothbrush wet	2. Would you like to use warm or cold water?
3. Puts toothpaste on brush	3. Would you like to use spearmint, or bubble gum flavored toothpaste?
4. Begins brushing teeth	4. Would you like to stand on the floor or on the stool?

How Do I Provide Choice Opportunities During Community Activities?

Community outings are great places to implement choice-making skills. Choice-making in the community is very important. It provides individuals with free time to do what THEY want to do. Just remember to take a few minutes and think ahead about the choice opportunities that will be available in each setting. Listed below are just a few places/events in the community that would provide many choice-making opportunities.

- grocery store
- local library
- sporting event
- fast food restaurants

Putting It All Together!

Now, let's take a look at how all the pieces fit together. Below is a chart that illustrates how each type of choice can be implemented across home, school, and community settings.

<u>Type of Choice</u>	<u>Home</u>	<u>Community</u>	<u>Question Format</u>
BETWEEN ACTIVITIES: Provide a choice between two or more activities during a routine.	BREAKFAST: Set the table or clean up after breakfast LEISURE: Watch a movie or play a game	LEISURE: Park or library	<u>CLOSED</u> : Would you like to do your spelling or science? <u>OPEN</u> : Which subject would you like to work on?
WITHIN ACTIVITIES/ MATERIALS: Provide a choice between two or more items within a specific task.	DRESSING: Shorts or sundress DINNER: Green beans or corn	RESTAURANT: Fork or spoon	<u>CLOSED</u> : Would you like to wear shorts or sundress? <u>OPEN</u> : What would you like to wear today?
REFUSAL: Before beginning a task, provide a choice of whether or not to participate.	LUNCH: Would you like to sit at the table or not? LEISURE: Would you like to go to the park or not?	LEISURE: Would you like to go to the movies or not?	
WHO: At the beginning of a task, provide a choice of whom to work or play with.	LEISURE: Would you like to go to the movies with Daddy or Phillip?	LEISURE: Would you like to go to the movies with Rachele or Abby?	<u>CLOSED</u> : Same <u>OPEN</u> : With whom would you like to eat lunch?
WHERE: At the beginning of a task, provide a choice of where to do the activity.	HOUSEHOLD CHORES : Would you like to dust the bedroom or the living room?	MEALTIME: Would you like to eat at McDonalds or Burger King?	<u>CLOSED</u> : Same <u>OPEN</u> : Where would you like to eat your snack?
WHEN: Provide a choice of when to participate in an activity.	LEISURE: Would you like to go to the park before or after dinner?	LEISURE: When would you like to go to the mall?	<u>CLOSED</u> : Same <u>OPEN</u> : When would you like to go to the park?
TERMINATE: Periodically during the task, provide the choice to quit.	HOMEWORK: Let me know when you want to stop and take a break.	LEISURE: Let me know when you are ready to go home.	<u>CLOSED</u> : Do you want to stop or continue? <u>OPEN</u> : Let me know when you are done.

(Adapted from Bambara & Koger, 1996)