

# Children want some say in decision making

When we became parents, many of us had no idea how much resistance we'd be up against. Do you feel like every time you ask the kids to do something, they dart out of the room to hide or they stay and become defiant? The more we try to make them listen to us, the more difficult they become. What's going on here?

Children, like adults, want to be in control of their own lives. They want to have some say in what happens to them. In other words, they want personal power. As parents, we often need to teach kids to do things they don't want to do. Chores, homework, even getting dressed in the morning can become a contest of wills. One of the most effective methods for reducing the strug-

## PARENTS CORNER



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gle for power is to give children choices. When we give our kids choices, we are giving them some power over their lives. When a child has some say in the matter, their resistance goes down. Ask a child who doesn't want to put

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Marilyn Suttle  
—parenting facilitator

her socks on, "Do you want to wear the red socks or your blue socks?" She will be much more likely to cooperate than if you said, "Put these socks on right now!" Kids obtain a little piece of power with every choice. However, there are a few important points to keep in mind when giving children choices.

Only give choices that work for you. Have you ever taken the kids out for hamburgers? Just as you finish passing out the food, putting the straws in the drinks and doling out these little cups of ketchup for the fries, the

children begin acting up. You might be tempted to give the kids the following choice, "Kids, you can either behave yourselves and eat here, or I'm taking you home right now." Before you give a choice, ask yourself, "Will either choice work for me?" "Will I really be willing to go through all the work of packing up the food and three hungry kids?" If this would not work for you, don't give them that choice.

Let's face it. Kids are not stupid. They know that it is highly unlikely that you are going to follow through. Just to

test you they may continue misbehaving or get even more out of control. However, if you do decide those choices will work for you, and you follow through, the kids will learn that you mean what you say. By consistently limiting choices to only those that will work for you, you earn credibility. So, if you want your child to have a healthy drink with dinner, only offer the choices you feel are right for him, "Would you like a glass of milk or juice?"

Keep choices age appropriate: "What do you want to wear to school?" A question like that can be too much for a young child and could lead to choices you won't accept, "I'll wear my bathing suit!" Give limited choices. "Do you want to wear your pink dress or your pant suit to school today?" Be sure to give choices that fit your child's age. We wouldn't ask a young child whether or not he wants to attend a private school, but it is completely appropriate for your teen to choose what college she wants to attend.

Don't save children from their poor choices: Experience is worth a thousand lectures. When your children begin learning how to do laundry, they may make the mistake a lot of us have made, leaving the clothes in the washing machine too long. What happens when wet clothes sit in the washer too long? They get musty and smell. Now, mistakes are not necessarily a bad thing because it's an opportunity to learn.

It's when we save children from their mistakes that we rob them of life's lessons. It's hard to resist the temptation to wash the clothes over again yourself or insist that your child wash them, right now. The child will learn more quickly if you don't save him. Instead you can give a choice, "Mike, the clothes have been sitting in the washer too long. You can either wash them again so they won't smell musty or you can put them in the dryer and wear them that way." If you can live with the idea of Mike wearing musty clothes, let him.

The experience will teach him more quickly than anything you can say because he gains firsthand experience of what it's like to wear musty smelling clothes. He's then more likely to tell himself not to leave wet clothes in the washer too long.

Giving choices when there are no choices: How can you give a choice when there is no choice? Your child has to bathe. There is no choice about that. When your child cries, "I don't want to take a bath," here are some choices that allow him to have some control over what he must do. "Would you like to take a bath or a shower?" "Do you want to have

bubbles or no bubbles?" "You can have a short bath or a long bath." "Do you want dad to read you a story while you bathe or would you like to play with bath toys?" These choices change the child's focus.

A child with sticky fingers must wash her hands. There is no choice about it. The more you insist, demand, and argue, the more resistant this child becomes. How do you give a choice when there is no choice? Try these: "Would you like to wash your hands with warm water or cold water?" "...with bar soap or liquid soap?" "...by yourself or with my help?" This gives the child some control over the situation. The focus is off of being forced to do something and onto the decision the child gets to make.

### Some extra thought

We wouldn't ask our child, "Do you want to do your homework?" The answer would probably be "no," and that we cannot allow. Try asking, "Do you want to do your homework now or in 10 minutes?" "You can do your homework in the kitchen or in your bedroom." "You can choose to do homework before or after your snack." It takes some thought on the parent's part to come up with these choices, but the goodwill and improved cooperation make your efforts worthwhile.

Understand why choices help children grow: In order to make good choices, you need to have the opportunity to make choices. The more you practice the better you get. Suppose you want to build strong muscles. No amount of yelling, coaxing, or lecturing to your muscles will make them stronger.

You need to use those muscles to make them strong. Let's give our kids a chance to use their thinking muscles. The following sentence is a hard reality and sums up the most important reason why kids need to learn to make choices: If your child is used to having others make their choices, others always will. Children are put at risk when their parents make all their decisions for them. It won't always be the parents a child listens to.

Eventually it will be a boyfriend, the crowd at school, or some other person who doesn't have your child's best interest at heart. Children grow in competence and confidence when they are given some personal power by making choices for themselves.

Marilyn Suttle brings skill building workshops to corporate and educational settings. Email Msuttle@aol.com or visit <http://member.aol.com/Msuttle>.

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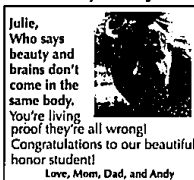
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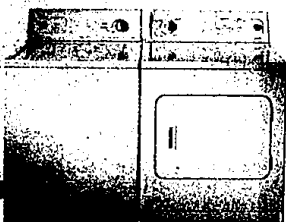
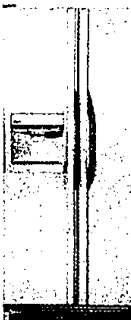
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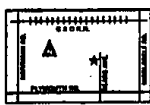
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