



UNIVERSITY OF
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EXTENSION SPOTLIGHT on FAMILIES

Give Children Choices

Children of all ages need practice making good choices. Many of life's challenges involve making choices, and the better they learn to make good choices, the more successful life they will have.

If we can provide opportunities for children to make choices about little things when they are small, they will be better prepared to make choices about big things when they grow older. For example, which shirt to wear in the morning, which pair of shoes to buy when in the store, which snack to have. Parents can guide, but not dictate, these choices, by offering two or three alternatives, all of which would be okay. "Any shirt they want to wear," is not helping them make good choices. They may choose one from the wash! "Would you like to wear the red one or the green one," is a reasonable choice for a small child. Not only are more choices confusing when they are small, but the idea that they choose from a limited number helps them start to grasp a rather complex concept – that not all choices are available or wise.

Freedom with limits is a good concept to teach. Not in those words, necessarily, but with that idea in mind. If they are picking out a pair of shoes, for example, the parent might set these limits: "The most I can spend is \$35. They need to be for school because you already have some for dress up. And it's going into winter, so they need to be warm enough." Suppose your child picks some that fit all three of those limits, but you don't like them? You can explain your concerns, but the child can make the choice. If you insist they buy the ones you like, then the child has not really gotten to practice making choices.

We need to also let a child learn to live with their choices. Did they blow their entire allowance on candy, when they really wanted to save for a special toy? That was their choice. Be gentle but firm in teaching them to live with their choices. If you "bail them out," or in this case replace the allowance foolishly spent, they do not learn from the experience. They develop the attitude that Mom or Dad will always fix it. Parents could fix these small mistakes, but they can't fix the larger poor choices they may make later. As children grow older, parents still need to work out appropriate limits for them, but with reasonable choices included. "When you are at a friend's house, it is okay if you go to the park, the arcade, or the tennis court. But you are not to leave town, even with their parents, without asking our permission." And into the teens, the choices become even more complicated. Parents are still there to help them set limits for their own choices. "You may go to the party, but if alcohol is a part of it, call me. I will come get you." And "Yes, I will park a block away so your friends don't know Mom is taking you home." This last little arrangement with your child helps them feel valued by you, and also helps them maintain their growing up image with their friends.