

Making Choices

Why is it important to offer children choices?

Making Choices is a good way to create opportunities for children to communicate. When children find communication difficult, they often try to do things themselves. By offering children a choice of two items, even if you know what they would choose, it encourages them to communicate with another person, to get what they want. This lets them to see the power of communication and it gives them some control over their day.

Making Choices also gives us an opportunity to 'model' or demonstrate how to make requests for things that they want. We do this by saying the names of things (often called 'labelling') or using a short phrase to show them how to request. This could be called 'expanding' their language by adding to what they are already saying. Another term often used is 'modelling', which means to demonstrate how to use words in real life situations. *See our advice sheet on 'modelling, commenting and expanding' for more information.*

When children are making a 'choice', they can communicate this through a range of 'non-verbal' communication skills even before they have words to do this with spoken language. They might use words, a look (eye pointing) or a gesture (reaching, pointing, moving their body/head towards a choice) to let you know what they want.

How to support choice making

- If your child finds making choices difficult e.g. they may try to get things for themselves or grab at both/all items you offer them, you can support them by making the 'choice' easier.
- Start by using one object you think they would really like (a desired object) and one object they might not be very interested in (a less desired object). What is interesting/motivating will differ for each child so make sure you are using objects that are motivating for YOUR child not what you think they should like e.g. for some children bubbles and wind up toys might be desired objects whereas for others flicking a piece of paper might be the most motivating thing for them.
- Once you have selected the items, hold the objects an equal distance away from the child, one in each hand.
- Offer the child a choice using simple language e.g. 'What do you want? Car or wooden spoon?' Show them the objects as you say the word linked to them.
- If the child looks at a desired object for a few seconds, reaches for an object, gestures or points to the object, you can take this as their choice.
- Use simple language, as if it was their voice, to 'model' or show them what words they can use to request and give them the object they chose straight away. If they are not using spoken words yet, you can model the single word for them as you give them the item e.g. 'Car'. If they used 1-2 words to request you can 'expand' this for them by showing them how to use a phrase to request e.g. 'I want the car'.
- They do not have to repeat this after you, hearing you 'model' how to request in real life situations is the best way for them to learn.



- As this becomes easier for them, you can start to offer choices of 2 desirable objects instead e.g. 'bubbles or ball'.
- As children become more confident with making choices, they may start to copy your language and request verbally, with or without additional gestures.
- Don't focus on 'please' and 'thank you'. As children develop more language, you can start to add these additional words in the future. At this stage, it is more effective for them to have more words to make requests or comments rather than just to be polite.

What next?

- Once your child can make a choice from 2 objects, you can start to introduce more objects e.g. 3-4 items.
- When this becomes easy, you can start to add in activities as well as real life objects. At this stage you might need to introduce some pictures or symbols to represent the activities to help them make choices of things they can't actually see e.g. going outside, going to the park, playing with water etc.
- See our advice sheet on using 'Choosing boards' for more information.

What if they 'choose' an item they don't really want?

- It is important that you take your child's first choice and remove the other option even if you know this is not the item they really wanted. This creates an opportunity to show them the power of communication.
- Sometimes when children are learning how to make choices, they will reach for the one they 'don't' want to 'remove' this but we still need to show them the outcome of this action.
- If they appear unhappy with their choice, you can repeat the options and 'show' them how to 'request' the one they wanted instead by 'modelling' simple language in their voice e.g. 'I think you wanted the car', 'I want car'.
- If a child verbally requests an item but points/look at a different choice, you would still give them the item they **verbally** requested. This shows that what they say is important and has meaning. You could always say: 'You said you wanted the **spoon**' and offer them the spoon. Most likely, they will not want the wooden spoon and will request the toy if you give them the option to choose again.

How can I use this in real life?

Think about all the opportunities across your day when you can offer your child choices. This can be in play or in simple everyday activities such as choosing:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ○ What clothes to wear | ○ What size bubbles to blow |
| ○ Which story to read | ○ What colour to use in painting/drawing |
| ○ What to watch on TV | ○ What size brick/car to drive |
| ○ Which way to go on a walk | ○ What toy to take out with you |
| ○ What shoes/hat to wear | ○ What to eat at snack/dinner time |

REMEMBER

- Always use simple language when modelling choices for your child
- Give them choices throughout the day in everyday activities and play
- Accept any form of communication they use to indicate their choice
- Model the words with real objects or alongside activities to help them learn what the words mean and how to use them in the future
- Always give them the item they have 'chosen' even if you don't think this is what they really want.

