



The Child's Need To Belong: Part 2 Meeting The Goal Of Contact

In our last session we talked about the child's need to belong, and that a child's behavior is directed towards getting this important emotional connection of belonging.

As we noted, a child's behavior is driven by four basic, yet unconscious goals: contact, power, protection and withdrawal.

Today I'd like to visit with you about how we can help our children in meeting their goal of contact.

To help a child meet the goal of contact, we encourage cooperation. One of the easiest, but often overlooked ways to encourage cooperation is to offer our children choices.

When we give choices, we help our children in these three ways:

- We help them feel in control of their lives;
- We foster cooperation, and
- We help develop independence.

Most of the conflicts we have with children under the age of six years involve getting them to do something they don't want to do in that particular moment.

Sound familiar?

Eating, getting dressed, going to bed or taking a bath are common conflict areas with our young children.

Most of the time, we can side-step conflict, encourage cooperation and help our children meet their goal of contact by doing this one thing: giving our children choices.

Giving choice is an effective tool.

But...how and when we present choices will determine our success.

Here are four important ideas to keep in mind when offering a choice.

- First, if a child can answer yes or no to your choice, you are probably offering an inappropriate choice that can set you and your child up for a power struggle and a conflict. Avoid yes or no choices.

For example, when bedtime is not negotiable, the choice should not be: Do you want to go to bed now?

- Our second idea is that our offer of choice should inform our children of our expectations and their choices.

For example:

It's time to get dressed for bed. *That's the expectation.*

Do you want to wear your blue or your green pajamas? *That's the choice.*

It time to run bathwater. Do you want bubbles or no bubbles?

It time for dinner. Do you want your broccoli with or without dressing?

Remember: First, the expectation, then the choice.

- The third idea: We need to be careful to not give too many choices.

Offering too many choices can be confusing and frustrating to the child. I'll talk more about that in a bit.

- And the fourth point is that we need to remember to offer choices whenever we can.

In a hurry to get things done, I've found it easy to forget about offering a choice, and finding myself deep in a power-struggle.

I have three stories I'd like to share with you to about giving choices.

First, is a story from my early parenting days to illustrate what offering no choices might look like.

A Story About Not Giving Choices

My trying to brush two-year-old Hannah's teeth was a struggle and a fight, every day.

Needless to say, I was frustrated, and bedtime and bath time were a disaster.

At our dental check-up, I mentioned our brushing conflict to Dr. Jim.

Dr Jim turned and said, Hannah, "Why are you fighting with your mom about brushing your teeth?"

And what did Hannah answer? "The toothpaste burns my mouth."

That was news to me!.

"Okay Hannah," he said. " Let's do something about that. How about we try some different flavors. I have cinnamon, bubblegum, peppermint and strawberry. Which one do you want to taste first?"

I sat there, amazed, as Hannah cheerfully sampled each flavor and selected a tube of bubblegum toothpaste to take home.

That was the end of our Battle of the Brush.

Before that dentist appointment, I hadn't considered giving Hannah a choice of toothpaste. Or much else.

I remain thankful to Dr. Jim for bringing down my stress level twenty points with bubblegum flavored toothpaste, AND showing me the power of giving choices.

By offering four flavors of toothpaste Dr. Jim had made contact with Hannah, helped her feel in control and allowed her to express her independence.

By offering choices Dr. Jim helped Hannah feel like she belonged, that she was part of the process of brushing her own teeth and caring for herself.

A Story About Giving Too Many Choices

Years later, I witnessed my friend, Martha, go too far with choices. Her conversation with two-year old Jacob went something like this:

Jacob, would you like oatmeal or eggs for breakfast?
Do you want blueberry, strawberry, cinnamon or maple?
Do you want brown sugar or honey?
Do you want butter or milk ?
Do you want apple, grape or orange juice?

When his bowl of oatmeal arrived, Jacob gave his mother a look and dumped his oatmeal on the table.

Martha looked at me in tears. "Giving choices isn't working", she said.

Martha gave too many choices. She should have stopped at oatmeal!

How do you feel when faced with too many decisions?

Overwhelmed and perhaps wanting a bit more time to sort through the implications of your choices?

When we give too many choices, we can confuse and frustrate the small child. The child can become overwhelmed by too many decisions. This feeling of being overwhelmed can discourage cooperation.

Having too many choices does not help a child feel in control. Being out of one's normal comfort zone can create doubt and reluctance to decide or act. These feelings can lead to misdirected behavior as the child tries to make contact with our adult guidance.

Offering limited and appropriate choices helps our children feel safe and secure, thus helping them meet the goal of contact to feel like they belong.

A Story About Giving Inappropriate Choices

And our third story is about giving inappropriate choices.

Jessica thought that giving three-year-old Charlotte a choice about what time to go to bed would make bedtime easier.

Unfortunately, Charlotte thought her choice was no bedtime. As you can imagine, conflict and power struggles ensued.

Jessica realized that giving the choice of when to go to bed was not the right choice to give a three-year-old. Jessica hadn't let Charlotte know that the expected behavior was to go to bed and sleep!

Jessica redirected Charlotte's bedtime choices to which of two pairs of pajamas to wear, or which of two books to read, or which of two prayers to say.

In a few days, Charlotte understood expectations and her choices. Charlotte cooperated because she felt like she had made contact with strong adult guidance, thus making the emotional connection of belonging.

When Jessica offered clear expectations and appropriate choices, bedtime became a loving ritual instead of a power struggle.

In Summary:

Giving children choices fosters self-control, cooperation and independence.

Giving appropriate choices helps children meet their unconscious goal of contact with us.

So...

- Avoid giving yes or no choices. as they may not be appropriate.
- First, give the expectation, then the choice.
- Don't give too many choices. Be aware that giving too many choices can lead to a child feeling overwhelmed and fearful of making a choice.
- Remember to offer your child choices whenever you can.

When you are faced with conflict or a power struggle, step back to see if you have...

1. stated your expectations for behavior clearly, and
2. have allowed your child an appropriate choice based on those expectations.

In doing so you'll be helping your child meet this unconscious goal of contact.

Time to put this into action.

When is your child uncooperative?

What choices can you give your child to foster cooperation and create this important emotional connection of belonging?

How can you state your expectations clearly and kindly?

For more put-it-into action ideas, head on over to MarenSchmidt.com where you have lots of resources available as a Kids Talk Reader.

Until next time, this is Maren Schmidt, wishing you joyful work with children!

Resources:

Adler, Alfred. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. Harper Torch Books (1964)

Dreikurs, Rudolf. *Children: The Challenge*. Plume Publications (1964)

Popkin, Michael. *Active Parenting Handbook*. Active Parenting, Inc. (1983)