

Offering Choices – Three Different Approaches

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In the life of a parent and child, there are several decision points every day: what to eat at a meal, what to wear, what to do, which story to read, and on and on. Some parents, who learn toward the *authoritarian* style of parenting, make almost all the choices for the child. Parents who lean toward *permissive* style let kids make the choices. An *authoritative* (balanced) parent offers choices within limited parameters or with criteria for what makes an acceptable choice.

Giving Orders – The Parent Makes All the Choices

There are many reasons some parents decide to make all the decisions. Sometimes it's that a parent wants to control things ("it's my way or the highway"), sometimes it's just faster and easier than waiting on your kid to decide, sometimes it is a parent who has high expectations for the child and believes they know the best route to accomplishing those goals. This has been called "Tiger Mom" style, from Amy Chua's book, in which she describes choices such as requiring that her children play violin and requiring them to practice, saying "To get good at anything you have to work, and children never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences... Once a child starts to excel at something... he or she gets praise, admiration and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun."

This parenting style can work well for some parents and some kids and may be working well in your family now. There are a few potential pitfalls to be aware of so you can avoid them.

- Children may not build the independent decision-making skills they'll need later in life.
- With overly high expectations / demands, some kids feel they're never good enough to earn a parent's love, and can feel dis-empowered and discouraged.
- Some children rebel against authoritarian style – in the short term, that means *lots* of power struggles, and in the long-term it can damage the relationship with the parent.

Giving In – Parents Let the Kids Make All the Decisions

This style of parenting could also be called permissive or *laissez-faire*. Dayna Martin, proponent of Radical Unschooling, describes it this way: "Parenting is supposed to be joyful, and it can be when we learn to connect with, rather than control, our children. When children are driven by their own desires, they learn what they need to, and it's not according to someone else's idea of what's best for them." Again, this approach works really well for some parents and for some kids. But, it can backfire unless you think about potential pitfalls.

- Sometimes children make bad choices, especially if they're not given much guidance or limits. Like wearing a swimming suit in winter weather or eating so much chocolate they get sick. Then parents have to decide whether to let a child live with the consequences

of that bad choice – “guess you’ll be cold” or whether to rescue the child from the consequences to keep them happy – which may mean they never learn from mistakes.

- Some children who have very permissive parents can struggle in school where they don’t understand the need to follow rules, or struggle in peer relationships if they don’t know how to share or take turns. They do need practice learning these skills.
- Having to make choices all the time can actually be exhausting and overwhelming for kids. Being asked to make choices all the time can lead to meltdowns for little ones.

Giving Choices Within Limits

Within an authoritative (balanced) parenting style, a parent has high expectations for the child and wants them to be successful, so they set clear limits and ensure only healthy choices are an option. (e.g. on a cold day, they tell a child they can choose between red and blue mittens, but a swimsuit is not an option.) The parent is also highly responsive to the individual child – ensuring there are always options the child will enjoy and giving some flexibility. (“You can decide whether you want to take piano lessons or play soccer, but whichever one you choose, I expect you to try your best and practice a lot to get better.”)

Ellyn Satter, author of [How to Get Your Kid to Eat: But Not Too Much](#) has some important ideas about the division of responsibility in feeding. The parent is responsible for *what*, *when*, and *where* the child eats. The child is responsible for *whether* to eat, and *how much*. The parent decides what good options to put on the table, then the child makes the decision from there, and the parent can relax, knowing that any choice the child makes will work out OK.

A similar approach could apply to almost all decisions, from getting dressed, to choosing a bedtime story, to choosing where to go to college. The parent first evaluates the possible range of options and decides what criteria would lead to a good option. If they’re working with a young child, the parent might offer only a limited number of viable options (2 options for a 2 year old – “do you want the pink shirt or the purple shirt?”, 3 for a 3 year old – “do you want blueberries, grapes, or a banana?”) For an older child, they might have more options to choose from, but you set the criteria: “you can choose what you want for lunch, but it needs to have a vegetable and a protein.” For a teenager, you can discuss together what the criteria should be, then they can make any choice that fits that criteria. “We agreed that your budget for back to school clothes is _____, and that the clothes have to be school appropriate and I have veto power. But you can choose whatever you want within those rules.”

In this approach, the parents are the ones “setting the table” with options. The child is empowered to make choices *within those limits*.

I’ve always told my children “you may be as smart as I am, but I will always be wiser because wisdom comes from life experience and seeing the long-term impacts of choices.” So, when I tell them the criteria for a positive choice, that’s coming from my long-term perspective about what can help them be successful. When I then let them make the choice, I show respect for their intelligence and give them practice at decision making which will guide them in the future.