

# Ecoplay Choice-Giving

You can't learn to make good choices unless you have the opportunity to make "not-so-good" choices. Making choices that lead to good consequences is a skill like any other. It has to be learned. If your child never has the opportunity to choose, then your child never has the opportunity to practice making good choices. The way your child learns to make good choices is to have the opportunity to make not-so-good choices.

Ecoplay uses an authoritative approach to choice making in which children are allowed some control over that happens to them through choice-giving. Such an approach gives children the opportunity to learn choice-making skills by taking responsibility for the choices they make.

Communicating with your child about choices and consequences allows the child some control within parameters that you define. When implementing choice-giving, you use the word "choice" four times. This is to reinforce the fact that the choice is up to the child, and the parent's job is to administer the consequences.

Allowing your child to make some choices for herself teaches her to make good choices while still allowing you to retain most of the control over choices and consequences. So for example, if you tell your six-year-old, "You have two choices for lunch today. You may have a ham sandwich or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Which do you choose?" then the child feels that she was able to exercise some control over what she has for lunch by choosing between two options. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, while you have given your child some freedom of choice between two options you've defined; ham and peanut butter and jelly, you've eliminated other less healthy choices like ice cream and cookies. In other words, while giving the child some choice over her lunch options, you've still retained most of the choice-making for yourself.

You as the parent control what the choices are in this way so that the "not so good" choices aren't catastrophic choices.

## Format for Choice-Giving

When giving a child any choice, use the word "choose" four times. This repetition of the word "choose" reinforces the fact that the choice is theirs to make, while the consequences of each choice are up to you, the parent. Here's an example of using choice-giving:

"If you *choose* to do your homework before dinner, then you *choose* to watch television for thirty minutes after dinner; however, if you *choose* not to do your homework before dinner, then you *choose* not to watch tv after dinner."

Using this format not only emphasizes that the choice is up to the child; it also reinforces that the consequences are the result of the child's choice. So if the child doesn't do her homework, then doesn't get to watch tv after dinner, the parent is free to reinforce the fact that when she chose not to do her homework, your child chose not to watch tv.

The format for choice-giving is below. You may fill it in with any behavior you would like, and with any reward you would like. Remember to keep the focus on a reward-based paradigm rather than on a punishment-based paradigm. Rewards reinforce a specific behavior while punishments just teach a child not to get caught.

"If you choose to [behavior you're trying to encourage], you choose [an appropriate reward that is acceptable to both you and the child]; however, if you choose not to [behavior you're trying to encourage], then you choose not to [receive the reward]."

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## What if my child doesn't want one of the choices I'm offering?

The easiest way around this is to make sure that the choices you're offering are acceptable to both you and your child; however, there will be occasions where your child will not accept either of the choices being offered. If that's the case, the "script" for such an exchange would look like what's written below.\*

Parent: "Susie, you can have either grapes or cherries for a snack. Which do you choose?"

(Susie asks for a cookie)

Parent: "I understand that you want a cookie; however, cookies aren't one of the choices. You can choose between grapes and cherries. If you cannot choose between grapes and cherries, then you have chosen for me to decide for you."

(Susie again asks for a cookie)

Parent: "I can see that you've chosen for me to decide for you. I choose cherries."

(Parent gives Susie the cherries)

If Susie acts upset because she didn't get a cookie, return responsibility for the choice to her by reminding her that she was given two acceptable choices and that by rejecting those choices she had you choose for her. The consequence of receiving cherries was directly linked to her choice. If your child chooses not to decide, they have still made a choice, and that choice is to have you, as their parent, decide for them.

\*from a concept by Dr. Garry Landreth, *Child-Parent Relationship Therapy*