

CHOICE MAKING

The following excerpts were taken from an articles by: D. Guess, H. Benson, and E. Siegel-Causey (1985) Concepts and Issues Related to Choice-Making and Autonomy Among Persons with Severe Disabilities. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*. Vol. 10, No. 2, 79-86 and M. Shevin and N. Klein (1984) The Importance of Choice-Making Skills For Students With Severe Disabilities. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*. Vol. 9, No. 3, 159-166.

- We all make thousands of choices daily without even thinking about it.
- The opportunity to make choices and decisions is an important and cherished component of our lives.
- Expressions of free choice are not only highly valued by our society but are also protected and encouraged.
- The opportunity to make choices reflects favorably on one's perceived independence, dignity, and self-worth.
- When we make choices and express preferences, it carries with it a certain element of risk. This is what personal autonomy is all about, and persons with handicapping conditions have the same right as others to acquire autonomy.
- To make a choice, is to express personal autonomy - which is our freedom to define who we are and what we value.
- To deny persons with mental handicapping conditions the opportunity to make choices based upon the possibility of future inappropriate actions is inconsistent with their rights to be fully participating members of our society.
- To be able to have choice allows us the power to determine what happens to us on a moment-to-moment basis as well as over the span of our lives.
- How we offer choices will be based on each individual and their abilities.
- For the student with limited social and communicative repertoires, it may be precisely those "off-task", "non-compliant" or "deviant" behaviors which represent the most effective current means of exercising some control over the environment, and are thus the best available expression of personal choice.

Responsiveness to Preferences

- In the initial stages of assisting a person in building a communication signal, one should seek to incorporate personal preferences. For example, this might involve allowing the person to select what bite of food to receive next, whether to wear a blue or green shirt, and whether to look at a book or go outside.
- Preference choices can be built into patterns of interaction that incorporate choice across a variety of daily routines and interactions.

Choice as a Decision-Making Process

- Choice as a decision-making process, involves the expression of preferences. It also implies the ability to actively select among 2 or more alternative conditions. Choosing thus becomes an act in and of itself, and an indication of the ability to make a decision based upon prior experiences, present needs, and future goals.
- "Choosing" is defined as the act of an individual's selection of a preferred alternative from among several *familiar options*.
- Consideration for teaching Choice as a Decision-Making Process include selection of response modes (signals/behaviors) to express choices, the identification of age appropriate areas where choices and decisions should be made, and the instructional procedures that could most effectively teach this concept.
- Choice-Making is a viable teaching target, to be subjected to task analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation.
- The key to maintaining the balance between student choice and professional responsibility rests upon:
 1. incorporating student choice as an early step in the instructional process;
 2. increasing the number of decisions related to a given activity which the student makes;
 3. increasing the number of domains in which decisions are made;
 4. raising the significance in terms of risk and long-term consequences of the choices which the student makes: and
 5. clear communication with the student concerning areas of possible choice, and the limits within which choices can be made.

Choice as an Expression of Autonomy and Dignity

- Lack of choice promotes learned helplessness and passivity.
- Every available opportunity to express preference, choice, and dominance needs to be identified and capitalized on.
- Three contexts for fostering choice-making skills in persons with severe disabilities are as follows:
 1. classroom activities designed to teach specific choice-making skills;
 2. integration of choice-making opportunities throughout the student's day, across curricular domains; and
 3. provision of opportunities, both inside and outside of school, for students to experience the benefits and consequences of choices they have made.
- A few of the many potential choices which students might make during the school day, if teachers begin to direct their energies toward expanding opportunities for students in this area, are as follows:
 1. Choice among activities.
 2. Whether or not to engage in an activity.
 3. When to terminate an activity.
 4. Alternative means of accomplishing an objective.
 5. Choices of partners for activities.
- By allowing the student to live with his choice, the teacher provides the student with an excellent opportunity to understand the consequences of personal, decision-making. Persons with severe disabilities must learn that for them, as for everyone else, some consequences of their choice will be negative ones.

Summary

It is the authors position that the ability and opportunity to express preferences, make decisions and exercise choices are, in themselves, invaluable contributions to adaptive behavior and should be an integral component of the education of persons with severe handicaps.

Consistent opportunities to choose and express preferences might well have a positive impact on the learning process (as a means), as well as on the more long term personal development of persons with severe handicaps (as an end result).