

Choice Making

Providing opportunities to make choices can mean the difference between a student being a passive or active participant within his environment. If a student is given a reason and the means to participate and communicate and he is reinforced for his attempts, then there is a strong likelihood that he will develop the ability to communicate his choices.

Guess, Benson and Siegel-Causey (1985) note in their article, "Concepts and Issues Related to Choice-making and Autonomy Among Persons with Severe Disabilities" (*JASH*, 10, 2, 79-86), "For most persons the ability and opportunity to make choices and decisions is an important and cherished component of their lives. The opportunity to make choices reflects favorably on one's perceived independence, dignity, and self worth. Expressions of free choice are not only highly valued by our society, but are also protected and encouraged."

Making choices often involves three related concepts:

1. **Preferences:** *What* does the student want to do; *who* to do it with; *where* to do it
2. **Opportunities:** What is available for making a choice at a given time – people to spend time with; things to do; places to spend time
3. **Control:** The authority to make use of an opportunity to satisfy a preference

(From <http://www.allenshea.com/choice.html> - Revisiting Choice – Part 1 by Michael Small)

Choice making works well within activities or routines. That is, within a particular scheduled activity/routine, the student can have opportunities to make choices about what he is going to do, or at least the order in which he is going to do the activities.

Choice making is also important outside of school hours too. For example, the student could choose his clothes, what book to read, what video to watch, etc.

The following are a few basic principles to consider when providing choices:

- Identify preferences (objects, activities, people, environments) that are motivating for the student.
- Determine a daily schedule of activities, which are functional for the student. Within these activities identify opportunities where choices could be offered.

- Determine the student's symbolization skills - does the student only identify with objects or can they understand the meaning of pictures? Do the pictures need to be photographs or colored line drawings, etc.?
- Identify the method(s) in which the student will give a response when offered a choice.
- Begin choice making by offering only two items at a time. As the student becomes more proficient with the task then gradually increase to number of choice offered to 3, 4, etc. (provided this is within the student's physical capability).
- Never offer something as a choice if you do not intend to allow the student to have access to it.
- Use physical and/or verbal cues if and when necessary. Fade out cues gradually as the student begins to respond on his own.
- Tell and demonstrate for the student which response method will be acceptable for choice making. In this way you will be training the student to develop a reliable and desirable response method.
- Continue to introduce and train new vocabulary with the student as he becomes more familiar with the routine of choice making.
- Make sure each choice is easily discriminated from one another. Many students have visual impairments, and rely on color, size, contrast, shape and lighting to discriminate objects and/or pictures from one another.

We all make hundreds of choices daily. Your student may not be able to make choices independently, thus it becomes his team's responsibility to offer him opportunities for choice making to encourage this skill development and the growth of his personal autonomy. It is suggested that a minimum number of 5 choices be offered each school day. This may be difficult at first, however once you begin to do it on a regular basis, you will find it gets easier. In addition, other opportunities will hopefully become more apparent to you as the process becomes more automatic. Once you achieve this level with some regularity, increase your objective by 2 each time until you feel you are at your maximum.


Sample Choice Making Routine

- Position yourself in front of the student.
- Show the student two objects, one-at-a-time. Label and talk about each item briefly. When and where appropriate, allow the student to touch and to interact with the objects for a few seconds (particularly if he is not familiar with them, or if he has a significant visual impairment).
- Remove both objects from the student's visual field.
- Present both objects together at mid-line and move one slowly to the student's right, and move the other object slowly to the student's left.
- Ask the student to look at or reach toward or touch the one he wants. Wait silently for several seconds allowing ample time for a response.
- Take the student's first steady gaze/reach/touch (to the right or left) as his choice.
- Tell the student what he has chosen and immediately involve him in the outcome of that choice.
- If you cannot determine which item the student wants, (inaccurate gaze, touch), tell him that you didn't understand which one he wanted and repeat above steps.

If the student does not respond to a choice opportunity, then you have one of three options available to you:

- Your first choice should always be to repeat the task. Students many times and for a number of reasons may not have understood the task. Thus your first response should always be to repeat the sequence, in addition to giving the student feedback that you couldn't read his response or that they gave you no response at all.
- The student may not want either item that you are offering and, therefore, does not respond. You can respond by telling him, " _____, you didn't choose ____ or _____. I think you don't want ____ or _____." At this point, you can offer two new items, if you wish, or just carry on to the next routine activity.
- The student may not be responding for any number of reasons. However, lack of response can have consequences. For example, you could say, "Since you

didn't choose one, I'm going to choose for you. I choose ____." In this instance, it would be preferable for you to choose the less desirable of the two items, as this may have a greater impact on the student. In some instances, both items will be of equal desirability, however whenever possible select the least desirable item.

	<p>Hold objects at mid-line, then...</p>
	<p>Slowly move them apart</p>

Ideas for Choice Making

- Clothing (shirts; pants; socks; hair “do-dads”, bandanas)
- Food choices (type of cereal, fruit, juices, etc; between food or drink)
- Cups to drink from (2 colours)
- Directions (which way to go for a walk)
- Books
- Music
- Videos/ TV shows

- Who to sit with, do things with, etc.
- Where to sit
- Activities (watching TV, going for a walk, playing a game, etc.)
- Order in which to do things (e.g., bath first; story first)
- Which colour, material or tool to use next in an art or woodworking project
- Which ingredient can go in a recipe next (if the order can be somewhat flexible – for example, fruit salad)
- Which row gets to be dismissed next for recess/home
- PE warmups – Student makes choices using pictures for class routines (fast, slow, jumping jacks, shopping, running, different directions)



Choices can be made **between different** activities.



Choices can also be made **within** activities

Choice Making Data Sheet

A Choice Making Data Sheet can be used to assist the student's team in looking at the frequency with which choices are being offered. In addition, the information from the data sheet will tell you whether the student is showing a strong preference for selecting primarily from the right or left. Other information that

can be obtained from this data sheet includes which items/activities the student tends to prefer. Thus you can identify a list of motivating items for Bo based on his frequency of choice selection.

It is suggested that if you are going to use the data sheet, that you try to keep very close and accurate records for 1-2 week periods, as opposed to collecting data daily over a long period of time. You will probably get sufficient information in a shorter time period (sampling) and it may be more accurate if you are only collecting data for a short time frame.



On the comments section of the data sheet, you can note how the student is making a choice: gaze, reach, touch, or grasp.

Note that it is important for this student to have the choices situated so that she can use her lower visual quadrant.



This student is using grasp to make a choice.



Students can also use voice output communication aids (VOCAs) to make choices.

