

Providing Choices

Offering choices is a powerful strategy for increasing students' engagement and ability to follow directions. Much challenging behavior is motivated by the need to feel some power or control. When adults find ways to share control, cooperation increases and power struggles are avoided.

There are many simple ways to build opportunities for choice-making into lessons and routines throughout the day.



Whole group instruction

- Where to sit: on the floor, on a chair, etc.
- How to take notes: outline, cloze notes, etc.
- How to participate: answer a question or pass during group discussion

Independent seatwork and practice activities

- What to write with: pen, pencil, marker, etc.
- How to access information: book on tape, read with a partner, etc.
- Which task/assignment to do first
- What order to do problems/activities within an assignment
- How many items to complete (beyond required minimum)
- Whether to do certain tasks designated as optional

Projects and longer-term assignments

- Choose topic
- Choose format of final product (within guidelines): report, drawing, presentation, multi-media product, etc.

Partner and group work

- Chose role/job within the group
- Chose partner/team mates (for some activities)
- Chose to work with a group or alone (for some activities)

Routines and activities

- When to do classroom jobs and other daily tasks
- What to do if finished with assignments (e.g., read, use computer, play a game, draw)
- How to gain attention/get assistance (e.g., raise hand, hold up a "help" card, etc.)

Incorporating Choices

- **Make rewards more powerful.** Presenting a “menu” of reinforcers that the student can earn is another way to add choice-making opportunity. These can be offered for task completion (“When you finish your math, would you like to read or draw a picture?”) or as part of a point or token system for behavior support. Allowing the student to select what to work for is almost always more effective than assuming all students will be motivated by stickers or other common rewards.
- **Communicate Clearly.** Be very clear with students about which things are choices and which are not. Don’t phrase a direction as a question (“Are you ready to work now?”) unless you are prepared to accept “no” as an answer. When a specific behavior is needed for a particular situation, make the directions explicit and positive (e.g., when instructing students to move safely through the hallway, say “Please walk,” instead of saying “Don’t run,” which seems to leave open the possibility of galloping, skipping, etc.)
- **Be open to alternatives.** Present controlled choices (e.g., “use markers or crayons for this activity”), but if the student proposes something that was not one of the original options but is reasonable (e.g., “how about colored pencils?”) consider accepting it. The goal of incorporating choices is to share control of activities and situations with the student; avoid unnecessary “no’s” and power struggles.
- **Incorporate interests.** Use things that you know the student likes into activities to build motivation and engagement. For example, offer a student with a passion for dinosaurs the choice of doing a research project on a famous paleontologist (even if the rest of the class is doing presidents); offer a pencil with dinosaurs on it to complete a worksheet. For more ideas about how to use student’s strong interests in class activities, see <http://www.paulakluth.com/articles/usingstrengths.html>
- **Allow the occasional “No”.** The chance to say “no” to something is very powerful for students. Periodically offer activities (both academic and recreational) that are truly optional. Decide in advance which things the student truly needs to do and which could be omitted. Add items to warm-ups, seatwork packets, etc. that are clearly presented as choices.
- **Saying “enough.”** Structure situations so that the student can decide whether or not to continue a particular activity. For example – if a student can have 15 minutes on the computer, after 10 minutes, ask “would you like to log off now, or would you like five more minutes”; after the student completes an acceptable number of practice problems, offer the option of stopping or finishing the worksheet.
- **Reflect on choices.** Help your students learn to make good choices for themselves. Build time into projects and activities to discuss what they selected and how it worked for them. Encourage them to think about what they might do differently in the future to be more successful. Challenge them to stretch beyond their comfort zone, without allowing them to flounder. Helping students understand their strengths, preferences, and support needs will allow them to be effective learners and self-advocates in a variety of environments throughout their lives.