

Provide Decision-Making Opportunities for Children and Adults

PEOPLE OF ALL AGES desire to make their own decisions. Both young children and older adults benefit from decision-making opportunities. They gain self-esteem and build higher-level thinking skills. It is up to caregivers to ensure that participants are offered choices appropriate for their developmental and cognitive levels. In this unit, you will learn how caregivers can provide decision-making opportunities for young children and adults in care programs.



Objective:



Identify decision-making opportunities for children and adults.

Key Terms:



autonomy
engaged
false choices
free play
planning
true choices

Opportunities to Make Choices

The opportunity to make decisions on a regular basis benefits children and adults in numerous ways. Their self-esteem is boosted when they are able to make choices. Children feel val-

ued and important when they feel that their opinions count. Older adults feel competent when they can make their own choices.

Decision-making boosts higher-level thinking skills. Children develop problem-solving skills. Small choices that may seem insignificant to an adult (e.g., what color cup to use) prepare the child's brain for more complicated decisions later in life.

Decision-making encourages

planning—making choices with a specific goal or consequence in mind. Children learn that their

decisions have consequences, and they are encouraged to think about those consequences before they act. Older adults can practice decision-making skills to keep their minds sharp.



FIGURE 1. Playing chess is one way for older adults to keep their minds sharp.

MOTIVATION

Teachers can motivate children to learn by offering choices in the classroom. Studies show that children learn best when they are able to pursue their own interests. When teachers allow children to choose their activities, the children are more likely to become **engaged**—actively involved and interested in the task. This promotes learning and encourages students to further explore the subject.

SENSE OF CONTROL

Providing choices also gives participants a sense of control over their lives. It prevents a “battle of wills” with young children, eliminating some temper tantrums. Children become frustrated when they are constantly being told what to do. Offering some choices—even very limited ones—gives children a bit of control. It also eases the transition from one activity to another. In older adults, the ability to make decisions protects their sense of **autonomy**—a person's freedom to make his or her own choices. Loss of autonomy often leads to depression and cognitive decline in older adults.

CHOICES FOR CHILDREN

Teachers should offer **free play**—a time in which students are able to choose their own activities. Most classrooms feature activity centers (areas of the classroom set up to accommo-

date specific activities). Common preschool activity centers include art, library, blocks, science, manipulatives, and dramatic play. Students should be able to move freely between centers during free play, choosing activities that interest them.

No Time Limits

Teachers should not set limits on the amount of time students spend doing any one activity during free play. Children should be able to spend a lot of time if they are engaged in an activity, and they should be able to move quickly until they find something that holds their interest. The selections should be developmentally appropriate, so minimal adult direction is needed.

Open-Ended Choices

Teachers should offer open-ended toys and materials so children can decide how to use them. For example, the art center should offer a selection of colored paper, different sizes of paint brushes, and a variety of items that can be used to create a collage or a sculpture. Children should be allowed to choose which materials to use and how to use them. Teachers should offer dress-up clothes and baby dolls that represent different genders and cultures, allowing children to decide how they want to play.



FIGURE 2. Having different activity areas and allowing free play daily is important for children.

Young children only need a few choices, especially at the beginning of the school year. As the year progresses, teachers can offer more options. If the classroom contains a large selection of books, it is best for teachers to display only a small portion at a time. The rest of the books can be rotated in, according to the class theme and interests. Children are less likely to be overwhelmed by the smaller display, and they will be able to examine the books to find one that interests them.

Developmental Levels

When providing choices, teachers should carefully consider the developmental levels of the children in the class and provide appropriate materials. There should be selections easy enough for the youngest child to master and more difficult options that will challenge the most advanced student. For instance, teachers should provide puzzles in a range of difficulties, from just a few pieces to more complex jigsaw puzzles. The variety allows students to choose their own challenge.

Visibility and Accessibility

Teachers should make sure the children's options are visible and accessible. Children may forget what their options are if toys are hidden when not in use. Open, low shelves and storage units work best. Teachers should put toys and other learning materials in clear, labeled containers. Books should be displayed with the cover facing outward on low shelves. In the dramatics area, coat racks or hooks display dress-up choices better than a box or a drawer full of clothing. Toys that are "off limits" for the day should be placed out of sight.

True Choices

Teachers should offer **true choices**—multiple options that are acceptable. They could ask students if they want red or blue paint or if they want to walk to the park or stay on the school playground. Teachers should avoid **false choices**—options that are not acceptable. A teacher should not ask a child, "Do you want to listen to a story?" if all the children are expected to sit down and listen. Instead, if the teacher wants to offer a choice, he or she should ask which of two books students want to hear first.

If no true choice is available, teachers could find another way to present options to students. For example, if there is only one snack available, the teacher should not ask, "What do you want for your snack?" The teacher could still offer a choice by asking the child, "Do you want one graham cracker or two?" or "Do you want water or apple juice to drink?" The children are allowed to retain their sense of control without an alternative snack.

Follow Through

If teachers offer a decision-making opportunity, they should follow through with the students' choices. If their selections are routinely ignored, children learn their decisions do not matter. They become disinterested in the decision-making process in the future. If a teacher asks a student what color paint he or she would like to use and the student picks purple, the teacher should provide purple paint. If the teacher instead puts out orange and green paint, the child's self-esteem suffers.



FURTHER EXPLORATION...

ONLINE CONNECTION: Choice Boards

Decision-making opportunities help boost higher-level thinking skills and self-esteem in children. Care-givers should provide choices that are appropriate for the child's developmental level. Very young children may benefit from visual images of the available choices.

Visit the following Web site to read more about how "choice boards" are used to present options to children in a choice-making intervention.

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/briefs/wwb15.pdf>

Rules

Teachers should let students know that breaking rules is not an acceptable choice. For instance, a student cannot choose to throw blocks at another child. The teacher should remind the child that he or she may choose to play nicely with the blocks or look at books in the library corner. Safety and health rules must be addressed by the teacher. Children may help make the rules, but teachers always have the final say.

CHOICES FOR ADULTS

Caregivers who work with older adults should consider the cognitive level of the participant when offering decision-making opportunities. Some participants may be mentally sharp, while others may suffer from Alzheimer's disease or dementia, which impair decision-making. Adults with no cognitive impairment should be given many choices. Caregivers should offer only two or three choices to people with dementia because too many choices may cause confusion.

Daily Care Routines

Daily care routines provide many options for older adults to make decisions. Participants should be allowed to decide what to wear each day. Caregivers can narrow the choices to two appropriate options for individuals who struggle with the decision. For example, the caregiver could ask if the participant would prefer a red sweater or a blue sweater on a cold morning.

Dining Options

Adult care facilities should offer options about dining. Participants should have a choice about what to eat. Even if the individual has doctor-imposed dietary restrictions, caregivers should be able to offer some choice between two kinds of sandwiches or vegetables. They also should be able to choose whether to eat a meal in their room or in the common dining hall.



FIGURE 3. People should have a choice in what they eat.

Personal Care

Caregivers should allow older adults to make choices about their personal care whenever possible. They may need help completing tasks (e.g., dressing and bathing), but most partici-

pants should be allowed to make decisions about the routine. Individuals can share their preferences on baths or showers, hairstyles, make-up for women, and facial hair for men.

Activities

Participants should be allowed to choose their activities. Caregivers should provide a variety of possibilities. Common options include bingo, card games, and crafts. Some seniors prefer more active options, such as exercise classes. Caregivers can offer outdoor activities, such as gardening and bird watching as well as entertainment options (e.g., speakers, singers, or other performers). Individuals should never be forced to join in an activity.

Special Outings

Special outings provide even more opportunities for decision-making. A trip to the drug-store allows individuals to make decisions as they purchase personal care products, favorite treats, or reading material. Outings also increase participants' options for entertainment, as they can choose to go to a movie or see a community theater production.

Summary:



Children feel valued and important when they feel that their opinions count. Older adults feel competent when they can make their own choices. Decision-making boosts higher-level thinking skills in children and keeps those skills sharp for adults.

Teachers should allow children to make decisions about their activities by providing free play time each day. Caregivers should allow adults to make decisions about their personal care and activities whenever possible. Professionals should consider the participants' developmental and cognitive levels to ensure that the choices offered are appropriate.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What are the benefits of decision-making for children?
2. What are the benefits of decision-making for older adults?
3. How does free play provide decision-making opportunities for children?
4. What is the difference between true choices and false choices?
5. What are some decision-making opportunities for older adults?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Visit an adult care facility, such as a day services center or a nursing home, or invite a care professional to visit your class. Be prepared to ask questions about how decision-making opportunities are presented to the program participants. Are choices limited based on the individual's physical and cognitive abilities? Has the caregiver noticed an effect (such as depression) on participants who do not make their own decisions?

Web Links:



Goals for Young Children in Preschool

<http://www.updc.org/abc/preschool2.htm>

Preschool Behavior Tip: Appropriate Choices

http://parenting.preschoolrock.com/index.php/preschool_behavior/preschool-behavior-tip-appropriate-choices

Taking on Responsibility Helps Preschoolers

<http://www.webmd.com/parenting/news/20050805/taking-on-responsibility-helps-preschoolers>