

EQUIPPED FOR THE JOURNEY

Choices & Compromises





Babies are created to be entirely dependent on adults to meet their needs. They cry; we feed them. They call out; we change them. They need comfort; we hold them, rock them, talk to them. They smile; we smile back. This is the healthy relational pattern created over and over again between a child and their caregiver.

This cycle of need continues throughout the first year of life, laying the foundation for a child's relational framework. This framework determines how they will learn to self-regulate (by first being externally regulated) and sets up an early pattern for all their future relationships. With a healthy relational framework, the child will have a positive outlook of themselves, their world, and the people in it.

But what happens when something goes wrong?

Many of our babies did not experience a healthy pattern for relationships. They cried, and no one came. They had a need, and no one responded. They needed comfort but were met with anger. Many of these babies then grew up to be toddlers, elementary school kids and teenagers who continued experiencing life in this matter. Eventually, our children lost their voices. They learned that crying doesn't stop physical or sexual abuse. They begged, but people kept hurting them or hurting their family member. While young children are created to be entirely dependent on adults, our children learned that adults cannot be trusted.

When you say yes in foster care, you say yes to all of this. You bring a child into your home who has very likely lost their voice, and it will be your new job to try to help them find it. The voice your child might be using now looks like aggression, control, hyperactivity, anxiousness, or lying. But listen - these are just coping strategies meant to protect themselves because they've never been allowed to use their voice.

As parents we are sometimes quick to take the "do what I said/my way or the highway" approach which just pushes our kid further away and doesn't show them that we see or hear him. That's not a teachable stance for our kids. Plus for most of us welcoming a new child, we don't have a long standing relationship of trust built up so your "do what I say" falls flat.

You give a child back their voice when you listen to them, when you attune, when you ask questions and remain curious about their behaviors, when you seek to teach them new tools, while also learning new tools yourself. Our kids have learned they don't matter—and it's your job to truly see them, see past the behaviors, and get back to those early stages of missed development. Using choices and compromises will help you on your journey!

A special note to parents with older kids: Older youth must be given a voice. They have experiences and opinions and have managed their lives for years without us. Many of our youth have found remarkable ways to survive. These skills may not be necessary in your home anymore, but they are engrained ways of being and our youth can't just simply put them aside. Choices and compromises are great ways to help our older kids to have their voices heard and to teach them healthier ways to get needs met.

To learn more about choices and compromises, check out the pioneering work of the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development and TBRI (<https://child.tcu.edu>).



Choices are an amazing TBRI tool designed to give voice back to our children. Giving your child a choice shows your child that you see them, that you value their preference, and that you'd like them to share in a decision. It is a pattern of communicating that gives voice back to children who have lost theirs and shares power with them in easy, safe ways while maintaining authority as a parent.

What is a choice?

A choice is giving your child two options, both of which you are comfortable with so you are happy with whichever one they choose.

Choices sound like this:

Do you want wear the red shirt or the blue shirt?

Do you want to start on your homework now, or do you want to take a shower first?

Do you want green beans or carrots with dinner tonight?

When learning about choices, it can be very helpful to understand what choices are NOT.

- A choice is not a threat of punishment if they don't comply with what you are asking.
- A choice is not an open-ended question. Open-ended questions convey to a child who is struggling that you have no plan or control, and this can be very scary for a child coming from a neglectful or harmful environment.
- A choice is not a directive. Directives can lead to push back and defiance. By simply changing the way you are communicating, a child can share control while complying with your ultimate goal.

✓ Would you like to clean your room up or do your laundry first?

✗ Do your chores or don't have electronic time tonight.

✓ Would you like to have a protein shake or eggs for breakfast?

✗ What do you want for breakfast?

✓ Would you like to hold my hand or hold onto the cart while we shop?

✗ Hold my hand.



Tips for Using Choices



How many choices?

If your child does well with choices, you can increase to 3 options. However, offering 2 choices is generally the most successful method.



Using Your Hand for a Visual.

For younger children or children with processing challenges, it can be helpful to use your hands or fingers when communicating choices. This gives them a visual way to stay engaged in the conversation.

This looks like:

Do you want to start with picking up your clothes (putting up first finger) or making your bed (putting up second finger)?



Eye Contact.

To make sure that a child is really with you, get down on their level and make sure you have eye contact. For an older child, you might instead say, "Eyes up."

But be cautious about eye contact. It should always be welcomed and not demanded in a harsh way. If you can't get eye contact, but your youth complies, then move on and look for ways to connect relationally later so you can still get healthy eye contact together as this promotes the building of attachment.



A Third Equally Good Option.

Sometimes we present two choices to a child, but they have a third preference that is an equally good option that we are comfortable with. (Parent: Do you want an apple or an orange for snack? Child: Could I have a banana instead?) If your child requests this third option respectfully, feel free to say "Yes!"

Keep in mind, however, that if your child shows a strong preference for ALWAYS presenting a third option to you, you may actually have a child who is struggling with trust and attempting to control all your situations. With this kiddo, you may have to practice having them accept one of your two choices instead, allowing them to choose a third option less frequently.



Choices & A New Child.

Keep in mind that choices can be a really helpful tool when you first welcome a new child into your home! Make up random things to give children choices about just to show a new child that you see them, that you value them, and that this home is a safe place for them to use their voices respectfully. This is an amazing way to build connection and trust leading to less defiance and behavioral challenges.



Compromises

Compromises are a TBRI tool parents can use with a child who regularly struggles with transitions or has a short fuse which is easily lit by basic requests. This tool is also helpful in times of defiance. Compromises are another way to give children voice and share power in safe, easy ways while maintaining authority as a parent.

What is a compromise?

A compromise is something a child can ask for in response to a request from you. With a compromise, the child will get a little bit of what they need/want while the parent also gets what they need/want.

What does it look like to use compromises?

"Imagine you are a parent and dinner is ready. Your child is playing in the backyard (or your teenager is shooting hoops). You step onto the back porch and call out, "It's time to clean up and come in for dinner!"

Let's look at three scenarios that might play out in a family that uses compromises:



PARENT: It's time to clean up and come in for dinner.

Parent needs them to come eat, but they want to keep playing.

1

Scenario 1:

CHILD: Ok, I am coming!

The child fully complies with the request. If your child handles transitions well and complies with your requests when asked, then compromises won't be a tool your family regularly needs.

This is, of course, the response that is easiest for parents! However, this is often not the response that comes easiest for children who have easily activated stress response systems and do not have a healthy relational framework.

2

Scenario 2:

CHILD: Can I have a compromise? Can I go down the slide one more time and then I'll come inside (Can I make my next free throw and then come in)?

In this scenario, the child uses their voice to ask for a compromise that is a reasonable option. You should say yes to these situations as much as possible because it gives your child a voice, reiterates to your child how to negotiate their needs with respect, and leads to good communication patterns.

It goes without saying, but children will not know how to use compromises until you teach them!

3

Scenario 3:

CHILD: No, I don't want to.

This is a defiant statement that needs an immediate response from the parent. Rather than threats of punishment (If you don't come in right now, you won't get to go outside tomorrow) or rewards (Come inside now and I'll give you a popsicle), help your child learn to respond by requesting a compromise.

PARENT: Woah, that sounds like you might be asking me for a compromise. If you want a compromise, you'll have to give me words.

Wait to see if they can try again with a request. If they request a compromise that is reasonable in a respectful way, say "Yes" and wait for them to carry out their side of the bargain (coming inside for dinner after they complete their slide or basketball shot).

If they can't or won't give you words, you'll need to stop what you are doing to figure out what's going on and why they're unable to comply or ask for a compromise. This might include that they're too tired, hungry, angry, etc. and they'll need you to step in and see if you can help them meet a need that will allow them to then choose compliance or a compromise. (More info on Nurture Breaks later!)



Mother, May I Have a Compromise?

A great way to practice outside the moment with younger kids is to play the traditional game "Mother, May I?" with a twist. When the child asks, "Mother, may I jump 5 times?", the parent always says no. Then the child asks for a compromise: "Mother, may I have a compromise? Mother, may I jump 3 times?" In response to the compromise, the parent always say yes! This playful way of interacting can lead to real life use of these tools during the next moment of transition or request for compliance.



Other Things to Consider



Change takes time.

If you're just starting out using this communication tool with kids you have been parenting for a while, they'll likely assume this new way that you are talking will go away and they just need to wait it out. Stay committed. If you give up after a few days or weeks, it won't work. Any new intervention or way of communicating as a family is going to take everybody some time to get used to it.



Practice outside of the moment.

When you first begin using compromises, your children will not instinctively get it or know how to ask you for one. You're going to have to teach them outside of the moment. Give them the language. Role play scenarios. Have each of you be the child and the adult, playing both roles. Then when you get into a real life scenario, prompt them when it would be time to use one, "Sounds like you are asking me for a compromise?" or "I don't understand the whining but I will understand a compromise if you ask for one."



Kids need time to choose.

As parents we often want immediate obedience or an immediate answer to a question we just asked, but our kids sometimes need to process what we've said in more time than we're used to giving them. So, learn to pause after you present a choice and count slowly to 5 or 10 in your head to give your child room to answer. If your child has not responded in this time frame, repeat the choice one more time, slowly and specifically, not using too many words!



In the beginning.

Keep in mind that your child might need more than 5-10 seconds to choose in the beginning. When you give choices, stay with them until they choose one or request a compromise. They need to know that you mean what you say. The only time to change course is if your child is becoming dysregulated, controlling, or unraveling in the moment.



Other language.

Feel free to use other words that mean the same thing such as "make a deal."



Nurture breaks.

If your kiddo is dysregulated, overly tired or hangry, he won't be able to make a respectful choice. Stop and take a nurture break first. You might see this at bedtime, before naps, after school, after a long day playing outside, etc. When our kids are depleted, this isn't the time for choices. Take a nurture break, and then come back to it. (More on the next page)



When you need to move on.

If your child is not choosing an option and you've followed a similar script but now you need to move on, make the choice for the child. "Okay, today we're wearing purple." If suddenly your child seems to be able to make a choice after you have: "Ok, I want the pink one!" Say, "I love the pink one and I hope you'll choose to wear it tomorrow but today I've chosen purple." Giving in to their sudden choice after the fact, reinforces the fact that they don't actually have to make a choice when you ask them to. Over time, using choices regularly should limit the number of these situation you find yourself in.



Nurture Breaks

Sometimes our children's bodies and brains are just depleted. They're exhausted, they're hangry, they're feeling all the big feels and they need a little bit more of us in those moments. It's easy to overlook these basic human needs when their behaviors are confusing or frustrating. But sometimes a controlling child, a whining child, or an angry child, just needs a momentary nurture break. Getting to really know our kids and to know their needs, can help navigate your best course of action in these moments.

Does he need regulation?

If he is worked up (tired, hungry, hot from playing outside, sick, angry about something unrelated) he may need a water break or snack break or 10 minutes of resting before he can choose. This is okay, learn to recognize the signs that your child is depleted and meet the need first. Then, they'll be ready to choose.

Are the two of you disconnected?

If so, maybe 5 minutes of connection will help bridge the gap. If you're asking him to do a task he doesn't want to do, say, "Do you want me to help you get started for 5 minutes or do you want to do it by yourself?" or "I think we need to have a snack together first." or "Let's thumb wrestle and then you can get the dishes done!"

Does he need space for a moment?

For some kids, especially our older ones, a moment of separation might be helpful as he may need a few minutes of "space" before he can either make a choice, request a compromise, or tell you what is wrong. As long as that separation isn't long term, isn't overly punitive, and ends with you reconnected and moving forward together, it is okay.

After the snack break or moment of reconnection, go back to the scene of the crime and try again. Give the same request you gave the last time and this time your child should be in a better place to comply or ask for a compromise. Do not move on until you get the response from your child that you need.



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