

Guidelines for Offering Choices

By Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. Reprinted with permission.

Like boundaries, choices are motivational tools that encourage young people's cooperation through empowerment. Choices build responsibility and commitment, communicate the teacher's respect for students' needs and preferences and can encourage students to perform a particular behavior. Choices also can help prevent disruptive behaviors.

Here are some tips for offering choices:

- Present available options in a positive manner. Be careful that the choice doesn't end up spoken as, "*Do it, or else.*"
- Be honest. Make sure that all options you offer are acceptable. Avoid setting the students up to people-please by choosing the right option or reading your mind. Make sure there are no wrong choices: If you don't want the student to choose something, don't make it an option. (For example, if you want them to do the outline first, offer sequence options about the other activities—after the outline is finished.)
- Make sure the choices you offer are clear and specific. Asking a child to "*select a meaningful learning activity*" leaves you open for broad interpretations. Instead, define choices with clearly stated limits. "*Select one meaningful learning activity from the five on the board*" is much easier for the student to understand—and perform successfully.
- Start simple. If a student is having difficulty making decisions, it may be that there are too many options or that the limits are too broad or unclear.
- If a student is having difficulty with even a simple choice, add another limit by asking him to choose within a certain amount of time (after which you will help him choose). Be patient. Some young students and well-conditioned order-takers need time and practice to develop confidence in their ability to choose.
- Increase options as the students can handle them, either by widening the range of choices you offer or by making the options more complex.
- Depending on your goals, schedule and resources, you might leave room for students to change their minds if they are disappointed with a choice they've made. If time and management require the student to make a choice and stick with it, make that clear when you present the available options. Reassure students that they can "*try again later (or tomorrow or next week).*"
- As they become more capable, encourage the students to participate in setting up choices (or negotiate an alternative assignment, for example) whenever possible. Clear limits are especially important in such cases; you might also want to suggest that they present their ideas to you for a final OK before they act.

- If students suggest a choice that you think is inappropriate, tell them your concerns and ask if they can come up with another idea. (Stating “*That won’t work for me*” is a terrific way to get this message across without attacking the student.) Reiterate your criteria if necessary. If something is just plain non-negotiable, say so, but help the student look for acceptable options available within those limits.

Excerpted and adapted from *The Win-Win Classroom*, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.
Buy the book: <http://janebluestein.com/2012/book-the-win-win-classroom/>