Tips for Choice Making

Providing choice making opportunities is a powerful strategy! Choice making has many positive features:

- Promotes communication
- Can be used with anyone
- Provides the youth with a sense of control
- Reduces potential behavioral escalations
- Is enhanced when paired with visual supports

To promote effective choice making, plan ahead for what choices will be needed, how choices will be offered, and how to modify choice making if needed. The following tips can assist in creating successful choice making interactions.

Provide Choices at the Needed Communication Level

Determine how the individual will best understand the choices being offered and best communicate their selection. One or more methods may be used.

- Speaking or other verbalizations
- Gestures, such as pointing or touching objects
- Using pictures, photographs, or icons
- Eye gaze to object, photo, word, etc.
- Proximity to the item
- Sign language

Motivating Choices

Choice making is most successful when the choices are motivating. If introducing choice making to a youth, include several highly motivating choices. Offering items or activities that the youth does not want may result in the youth refusing all choices. Over time, adding a variety of choices can help the team understand what is most preferred by the youth and when it is preferred.

Assess Understanding

Making a preferred choice requires that the person is aware and accurately understands the choices being offered.

- The youth must be able to differentiate between the pictures, icons, objects, or words used to offer the choices. If the youth makes a selection but then appears to be upset or refuses the selection, review the way the choices are offered to determine if there is a miscommunication or misunderstanding about the choices.

- The youth must also understand how to indicate their choice and be able to complete the required action. For example, if the action is to verbalize their choice, but in times of stress this is difficult, consider other options such as pointing to a picture or object.

Unavailable Choices

- It is important that the choices offered are available. If unsure, confirm that the item, activity, person, etc. is available before offering. If unsure, do not make it an option.

- At times, an often-recurring choice may not be available such as when all the cookies have been eaten, or a toy is broken. The youth may assume it is a choice, even if not offered. Be proactive and offer an explanation. Provide information about when it will be available. For example, tell the youth that the cookies are gone and explain when cookies will be available. This is a difficult situation, however helping the youth to understand that 'not available' does not mean 'not available forever'. This is a powerful skill for the youth to develop.

- Choose your language carefully when explaining. Avoiding trigger words such as, "No" or "Stop".

Teaching and Supporting Choice Making

Choice making is a skill that needs to be taught. For some it is a natural process that occurs during child development. For others, the skill may not develop naturally, and it can become a high demand activity for the youth. If needed, plan time to teach choice making in as low-stress a process as possible. Be aware, choice making can be difficult for even the most verbal or skilled individuals. Do not assume the youth does not need support in the process.

1. Begin teaching when the individual is calm, regulated, and focused. Avoid trying to teach when the youth is upset or angry.

2. Gain attention by using the youth's name.

3. Present choices in the manner that the youth understands, adding visual supports if needed.

4. If necessary, make the person aware of what is not a choice (something that is not available that was in the past).

5. Provide choices that include options that are known to be motivating.

6. After presenting choices, wait quietly 10 to 15 seconds for a response.

7. If no response, repeat the steps above.

If the youth is still unable to make a choice, consider modifying the interaction in one or more ways:

1. Decrease the number of choices. Do not remove the most motivating choices.

2. Add a visual support or object cue if not already used.

3. Reassess environmental conditions. Is it too auditorily or visually distracting? Is the youth comfortable?

4. If the youth is looking at the visual choices and focuses on one, provide support by saying, "I see you're looking at ___. It is _____. I wonder if you want the ____".

5. Avoid asking, "Do you want this?".

Respond Quickly

Once a choice is made, be prepared to respond quickly. Some youth can wait for the item or activity if they know when it is going to happen. Others will need the choice to be available quickly. Some will need access to their selection immediately. In all situations, once the choice is made, respond quickly! Acknowledge that you understand the choice and explain when the choice will be made available if not immediately provided.

Avoid Yes and No in Choice Making

Be cautious when offering a choice by saying, "Do you want _____", and expecting the youth to respond "yes" or "no".

- Some youth will respond "yes" and some "no" without processing the question or the choice.

- Some youth have had experiences where "yes" is the expected or accepted response and will default to "yes" regardless of their true desires.

- Some may choose "no" because of past experiences where new, different, or uncertain situations were found to be unsafe.

This can lead to confusion and frustration for both the youth and those supporting the youth. Instead of using "yes" and "no" in choice making, offer choices and wait for the youth to select a choice without requiring "yes" or "no" in the response.