

Requesting and Choice Making

Why is it important?

Every day, we make many choices. We choose what to eat for breakfast, what to wear, what to do (if it's a weekend!), what to put on the grocery list, what to watch on T.V., when to go to bed, etc. Children make their own choices and learn a lot while they are making these choices. Choices can be expressed verbally ("Can I have honey on my toast?") or less directly through actions (choosing to sit next to a particular person in the lunch room). Having the ability to make choices allows a child to have some control over his or her environment. For children with physical disabilities, this can be extremely important, as they may not be able to explore the space around them by moving around.

- Making choices allows a child to play an active role in interactions with others.
- Making choices allows a child to learn about consequences.

When should we try it?

When your child is demonstrating the following skills, the child may be ready to make choices:

- Is the child able to look at an object?
- Is the child able to interact with an object in some way (reaching, grasping, pointing)?

How to help a child make a choice between 2 objects:

- Very young children may begin by indicating choices between two real objects.
- Begin by showing the child two objects, slightly out of the child's reach.
- Show the items one at a time and name them. Present each object long enough for the child to focus on it.
- Show both items, still slightly out of reach and ask the child what he or she wants.
- Pause and wait until the child reaches toward or looks steadily at an item.
- Give the item to the child.
- If the item is a toy, you can use it to engage the child in a short, pleasurable interaction, before repeating the choice making procedure.

How to help a child to make a choice using eye gaze:

Eye pointing or eye gaze may be used if a child is unable to indicate a choice using his or her hands. Using eye gaze to communicate something is a more sophisticated skill than just looking at something and usually requires more training.

- Present the items one at a time, giving the child plenty of time to see each item.
- Ask him or her to look at you before asking what he or she wants.
- Once the child is looking at you, ask him or her to look at what he or she wants.
- Ask the child to look back at you when the child has made his or her choice.
- When the child looks at one item, name it and give it to the child.

Making a choice using pictures:

In order to request something that is not in the immediate environment, the child must learn to use a system that involves representations or symbols (speech, pictures, signs, etc.)

Using photographs, pictures or symbols to request:

- Begin by pairing the photo with a high preference object. When the child is interacting with the object, have the photo there. Draw the child's attention to the photo.
- Have the preferred toy out of sight. Present the photo of the toy. If the child accidentally or intentionally touches the photo, give him or her toy. If the child does not touch the photo after a pause provides cues.

Using cues effectively:

Cues might include:

Hand-over-hand prompts (physically moving the child's hand to the photo)

Tactile prompts (a light touch on the child's hand)

Verbal prompts ("look at the picture", "what do you want?")

Modeling (touch the photo yourself)

- Always wait and give adequate response time, before giving more prompts. Gradually fade prompts.
- When the child consistently touches the photo to request an object, then try presenting the photo in a different place that requires the child to look for the picture. The child must now learn to search and locate.
- When the child consistently locates and touches the pictures to request you may increase the number of photos. Presenting a high preference picture with a neutral preference picture makes the choice making easy for the child and gives the teacher an idea of whether or not the child is making a definite choice.

Points to remember:

- Provide the child with object represented in the photo the child touches first. Don't wait for him or her to touch the one *you* think is preferred.
- Provide the object without delay.
- New photos should be paired with the object before being used with others in a choice-making situation.
- Objects being requested should be preferably out of sight and at least out of reach.
- Train use of photos using highly motivating objects in natural, highly functional contexts.
- Change the position of photos when the child is selecting between two or more objects, to ensure that the child is not always choosing based on location (e.g., the child always chooses the symbol/picture in the middle position).

Something to try:

- Use a set of breakfast symbols to practice giving a choice of what to eat or drink.
- Choose a day when you will have time to spend on this activity.
- Select the symbols that represent foods which are available and which your child enjoys.
- You may wish to start with just one or two symbols.
- Keep the Velcro symbol board somewhere accessible. (For example, on the fridge door.)