

The Giving of Choices

The family was finishing up their meal in the restaurant when the mother reached into her pocketbook, pulled out one of those moisturized cloths, and said the following to her young daughter: "Do you want to wipe your hands and face or do you want me to do it?"

Those of us who are parents have probably spoken words like these on many an occasion but it is interesting and instructive to reflect on the language this mother used and the messages her words conveyed to her daughter. First of all, the mother was providing her daughter the opportunity to be independent; the mother was saying that she believed her daughter was capable of wiping her hands and face by herself and she would be allowed to demonstrate that independence if she chose to do so. And the mother was providing her daughter with a choice; she wasn't dictating what had to happen. However, the key to these choices - clean your hands and face by yourself or with my help - is that they were both acceptable to the mother. Behind these two choices, therefore, there was another somewhat implicit message - you will clean your hands and face; about that there is no choice.

On any given day, parents need their children to do countless things: putting toys away, getting ready for bed, getting dressed for school, and finishing a meal are just a few examples of those moments in the life of parents and children. There are two principles that can be helpful to keep in mind when negotiating these moments in time. First, allowing children some autonomy and independence is a good thing; children need to feel as if they have some power and control in their lives. This first principle, therefore, is for the sake of the child. The second principle to keep in mind is one that focuses on the needs of the parent. This principle is simple - only provide choices that are acceptable to you and keep the choices to a minimum, usually just two, three at the most. If it is time to put toys away and get ready for bed, offer the following choice: "You can put the toys away by yourself or I can help you." When it is time to get dressed for school, lay out two different outfits and let your child choose which one he wants to wear. At bedtime, let your child know that you will read one more book and she can choose which one she wants to read *between these two titles*. Just like the mother in the restaurant, you are sending two messages with your words. The first is that your child is allowed power to make some decisions and choices; the second is that there are some decisions about

which he has no choice - the toys will be put away, he will be getting dressed to go to school, and he will be getting into bed and going to sleep.

There is one more principle related to the giving of choices that is important to keep in mind: Don't ask questions that allow your child to give an answer - to make a choice - that is unacceptable or one you don't want. Instead of the words used by that mother in the restaurant, many of us have said something like the following: "Would you like to wipe your hands and face?" In this case, the child can choose to say, "No." Unless we really meant to accept "No" as an answer, this is an example of why we parents need to choose our words very carefully.

T.J. Corcoran, JD, MEd
Founder, The Corcoran School