

# Autism Q&A Fact Sheet

## Autism Q&A: Providing Choices

**QUESTION:** Why is choice making important?

**ANSWER.**.....

Antecedent Based Interventions (ABI) are evidence-based and proactive strategies designed to reduce the occurrence of interfering behavior. ABI focuses on modifying the environment and changing elements that could trigger an interfering behavior. In other words, the goal of ABI is identifying what in the environment is causing the interfering behavior to occur and putting things in place that will PREVENT the behavior from reoccurring. These positive and proactive strategies help individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) feel safe, in control, and prepared! ABI includes strategies such as modifying the environment, providing choices, and using motivating items. This practice brief will discuss the importance of providing choices.

Making choices is a part of every person's life. Imagine the number of choices you make in a single day. It often starts with getting dressed in the morning as you choose what clothes you wear and continues as you make choices for breakfast, how you'll drive to work, what tasks you will complete first, and who you'll eat lunch with. It also includes larger choices such as what you want to do with your life, how you'll spend your money, or where you'll go on vacation. We often forget just how many choices we make in our everyday lives! We also forget that making our own choices is a basic human right.



Can you imagine what life would be like if you had no control over what you ate, where you went, or what you did?

Due to the primary and secondary characteristics of ASD, making choices isn't always an intuitive part of the day for many people with ASD. Some individuals may not understand what their choices are while some may not be able to communicate those choices to others. Providing opportunities to make choices allows individuals with ASD to develop a sense of self, build self-esteem, improve problem solving skills, assist with learning the responsibilities of making choices, and learn how to reduce conflicts. Like anyone else, an individual with ASD needs opportunities to make choices throughout the day. Providing opportunities to communicate and make choices will help reduce the chance of interfering behavior and allows individuals some control over aspects of their life.

**QUESTION:** How to provide opportunities to make choices?

**ANSWER.**.....

Students with ASD can have many opportunities to make choices throughout the day. The teacher may ask the student if they want to complete their math work or finish their independent reading first. The student still does both things, but has some choice over which is completed first. During circle time, a student may be allowed to choose where she sits on the carpet or which song the group sings. During lunch time in high school, a student can choose where he sits or what he is going to eat. Other opportunities

for choices can include where the student will complete his or her work in the room, what they will use to write with, or who the student might work with. These are just a few examples of how to practice choice making opportunities throughout the day.

Learning to make small choices as a young child can lead to making the bigger choices one might make throughout their lifetime. Ultimately, making choices improves communication, quality of life, and independence. Typically developing children can usually identify activities, foods, and items they would prefer. However, due to communication challenges, understanding preferences, and making choices known, it can be difficult for some individuals with ASD. Their choice making experience has often been limited. Therefore, many individuals with ASD can benefit from a concrete way to visually understand what their options are and how to communicate that choice to others. One example of this is a choice board.

Some examples of when a choice board might be useful include choosing:

- Activities during free or play time
- Between food items during snack or meals
- Between two books at library
- Between sensory activities
- Which academic tasks to work on first (if possible)
- Which work tasks to complete first (if possible)
- Which recreational activities to enjoy
- Who to spend time with

Choice boards can be individualized to the needs of the individual as well. Some individuals with ASD may need to start with choosing between two items while others may be able to choose from a wide range of activities or items. It's important to respect the choices an individual makes, especially if one of their choices is saying NO. While saying no may not always be an option, it IS important to provide a student ways that they CAN say no in their day. Learning to say no is a crucial communication skill ALL individuals must have in their life.

Providing choices is an important skill to teach every person with ASD. It is also important to provide opportunities for individuals to

make their own choices throughout the day so they can practice this skill and be able to express their wants and needs. Developing this skill will lead to greater independence for individuals with ASD and will assist in preventing interfering behavior.

## WAYS TO MAKE A CHOICE

- Start with limiting the number of options available. Instead of offering four or five options, provide two possibilities, two topics to write about or two activities to play. Avoid wide open choices such as, "choose a topic", or "choose an activity".
- Use visuals to show the choices to the individual using written words, the item or pictures of the option.
- With the student, make a list of an assortment of choices that are made daily (clothes, breakfast, computer game, emotion, words, where to sit at lunch and so on). Include small minor choices and more important choices in your list.
- Together discuss the difference between BIG and SMALL decisions. How do we make each type of decision? Discuss which one of the two categories each decision would go under. This helps demonstrate the types of decisions and which ones require more thought and time.
- Teach the individual how to flip a coin for small decisions. This is especially helpful when all else fails.
- Make the options possible (Don't give an option that cannot be granted, like playing outside if there is a thunderstorm, or eating crackers if you don't have any left).
- Avoid using punishment as an option (Stop playing Xbox or go to straight to bed).

## RESOURCES

- Stephenson, J. (2016). Using the Choiceboard Creator™ app on an iPad© to teach choice making to a student with severe disabilities. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 32(1), 49-57.
- Reutebuch, C. K., El Zein, F., & Roberts, G. J. (2015). A systematic review of the effects of choice on academic outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 20, 1-16.
- <http://milestones.org/individuals-with-asd/self-advocacy/>

**Author:** Alicia Hart B.A. and Staci Carr, Ph.D.

**Editor:** Valerie Brooke, M.Ed. and Selena Layden, Ph.D.