

Providing Choices

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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. Making our own choices is a basic human right!

The characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may impact an individual's ability to recognize when choices are available, communicate their preference, or understand potential consequences of their choices. However, like anyone else, individuals with ASD need to actively make choices about their lives and may need support to learn choice-making skills. Providing choices is a proactive strategy (Antecedent-Based Intervention) that helps individuals with ASD feel safe, in control, and prepared! Educators and others who support autistic students can incorporate choice-making into daily routines to support learning and behavior outcomes. Specifically, providing opportunities to communicate and make meaningful choices will help:

- Reduce the chance of interfering behavior
- Build self-esteem
- Teach the responsibilities of making choices
- Develop a sense of self
- Improve problem-solving skills
- Develop skills for how to reduce conflicts

● Provide Choice-Making Opportunities

In a school setting, student choices can be limited by the expectations and structure of the school day. However, teachers can provide opportunities for students with ASD to make choices throughout the day. The teacher may ask the students 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, students may be allowed to choose where they sit on the carpet or which song the group sings. During lunchtime in high school, a student can choose their seat or what they are 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 an essay, or who they will work with on a group project. These are just a few examples of how to practice choice-making opportunities throughout the day.

Increasing student engagement with academic tasks can also be supported by choice-making. Providing differentiated learning opportunities to promote learning may influence students' eagerness to complete academic tasks. Some autistic students may need to start by choosing between two subject areas, while others may be able to choose how they would like to complete their academic tasks. For example, if prompting a student to practice spelling their name produces interfering behavior, the student may benefit from having a choice of how that particular academic task will be completed. As a result, choice-making would provide the student with different options, such as alphabet blocks or flashcards to spell their name or incorporating other activities to meet the student's unique learning needs.

● Tips for Supporting Choice

- Communicate when choices are available and when they are not. Clearly identifying student choice time vs. teacher-directed activities can help prevent interfering behaviors and give the teacher instructional control.
- Be predictable by consistently offering choices at the same time of day or during specific activities.
- Offer visuals, such as pictures, symbols, and tangible objects for students to communicate a desired choice. For example, a student with limited verbal language may communicate their desired choice by choosing between two or three options presented on a choice board.
- Make sure you can honor the student's choice before offering options. For example, avoid presenting options that cannot be granted, like playing outside if there is a thunderstorm or eating crackers if you don't have any left. In doing so, interfering behaviors are avoided.

● References

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- <http://milestones.org/individuals-with-asd/self-advocacy/>
- <https://www.unl.edu/asdnetwork/downloads/virtual-strategies/ChoiceMaking.pdf>



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For additional information, visit the ACE website: www.vcuautismcenter.org



Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Education (VCU-RRTC-ACE) is funded by the Virginia Department of Education, contract #881-APE61172-H027A220107. Virginia Commonwealth University is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution providing access to education and employment without regard to age, race, color, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, veteran's status, political affiliation, or disability. If special accommodations are needed, please contact Jennifer McDonough at jltodd@vcu.edu.