



## Skill 12 Choice Making

### What does choice making mean?

While choice making may sound simple, it can actually be a complicated process that involves many different skills. Choice making involves considering different options, making a decision, and then communicating that choice. Making and communicating a decision, or a choice, is a part of everyone's life. From the moment we wake up in the morning to the moment we go to bed at night we are all making a series of choices about what we want and what we don't want. Some of the choices that we make are more mundane including:

- What clothes should I wear today?
- What do I want to eat for breakfast and lunch?

Other choices that we make in our day to day lives are more meaningful such as:

- What do I want to do for a living?
- Where do I want to live?

### Why is this skill important to teach?

The ability to determine what you want throughout the day or what you want for your life is a basic human right. Making small and big choices helps everyone feel more in control of their life. Can you imagine what your life would be like if someone always made a choice for you? What if someone was always choosing what you didn't really want? Choice making is a part of something called self-determination. Self-determination is the freedom to take control of your own life by making decisions and acting on them. Being able to communicate choices about what we want is fundamental to our well-being and quality of life throughout our lifespan.

### Why is choice making difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Due to the characteristics of ASD, making choices is not always easy. Some children with ASD may not fully understand what their choices and there may be challenges in understanding different words and phrases that can cause significant confusion. Other children with ASD may understand their choices but not be able to communicate them effectively. It's also important to consider that

some children with ASD may not be able to weigh the pros and cons of different options effectively and can have significant anxiety about making the ‘right’ choice.

It’s also important to know that if a child with ASD always has someone else making choices for them, the child is unlikely to always get the things they really want and need. This can lead the child to use behavior as a means of communication. In other words, if a child can’t communicate their choices in some way, they will use behavior such as screaming, kicking, or crying as a way to say, “No, I don’t want that. I want something else!” Teaching a child how to make and communicate choices and providing many opportunities for a child to practice this skill throughout the day can actually reduce the chance for interfering behavior.

## What are some considerations for teaching a child about choice making?

This skill is composed of two parts—choosing and requesting. Unlike other types of requesting for a specific item that is wanted or needed, this skill requires the child to make the choice first. Before working on choice making, be sure the child is comfortable requesting items that are not directly in sight. Check out our other toolkit and activities on Requesting an Item/Person/Activity if your child still struggles with that particular skill.

Some children with ASD can have difficulty when combining choosing and requesting. In order to support the child as they learn this skill, pay attention to whether the child is able to choose between two, three, four, or more items in different situations. Is the child overwhelmed by too many choices? If so, it may be necessary to limit the child’s options to only two options at first. Some children may also have difficulty with making a choice when they cannot see the items in some way. For some children, this might mean showing the child the actual objects they can choose from such as holding up two different cereal boxes when choosing breakfast. For other children, this might mean using a visual support such as a photograph, icon, or drawing of their options. Visual supports also allow a child to make a choice even if they cannot communicate that through verbal speech or some form of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) such as sign language just yet.

Another consideration for teaching this skill is motivation and reinforcement. When teaching a child any new skill, we often use some type of reinforcement as encouragement. Sometimes that motivation includes just a quick good job or maybe even a sticker or a treat. However, when a child makes a choice for something they want or need, the child is naturally reinforced by getting that item or object or activity. Since a child is rewarded with the item or object or activity they want when they ask for it, the child is motivated to keep using this skill. By practicing this skill, children can quickly learn the power of communication! Additionally, this is a skill that can be practiced throughout the day during natural routines such as eating breakfast, during play time, or even while out running errands.

Before starting, it’s also important to take into account how a child communicates. Some children with ASD use Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC) such as sign language, picture exchange, or even a device that speaks when a button is pushed. Other children with

ASD can use some verbal speech but need support by using cue cards with a word and/or picture or by using a sentence strip or choice board with different options for questions and comments. Be sure the child has the vocabulary they need to participate in any activity.

## What materials will I need?

Families might need the following for teaching a child how to ask for items / people / or activities:

- Consider the child's preferences and what items / people / and activities that they really enjoy. Teaching this skill will only be successful if the objects and activities available are very motivating and rewarding to your child. If some of the choices available aren't appealing, the child may not be motivated enough to make a choice.
- White board
- Markers
- Pre-printed visual supports to include cue cards or sentence strips
- For Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users, be sure the child has access to the vocabulary needed to participate including sign language, picture exchange items, or a communication device that is programmed with the appropriate pictures and words.
- Consider times and places to initially practice this skill where your child will not be distracted by TVs, pets, or by a lot of sounds or people.

## Activity #1 Offering Two Items for a Choice

- In this activity, you will present two actual objects for the child to choose from. Be sure the objects that you present include one of the child's preferences. This activity can be done during daily routines like breakfast or getting dressed but also during play time or story time. Let's take breakfast as an example here.
- If the child eats cereal for breakfast, determine two types of cereal that can be offered to the child. This can include a type of cereal the child prefers and a type of cereal that the child does not enjoy or can include two types of cereal the child enjoys. For a child who is just starting the skill, it may be useful to include an obvious preference and one the child clearly dislikes.
- Hold up the two cereal boxes so the child can see them.
- Ask the child, "What do you want?"
- If the child responds by indicating a choice, provide the cereal immediately.
- If the child does not respond, you can repeat the question, "What do you want?" and wait a few seconds.

- If the child does not respond, you can move the box closer to the child and say, “Do you want Cheerios?” then move the other box closer and say, “Or do you want Rice Chex?”
- If the child responds, provide the cereal immediately.
- If the child does not respond, it may not be a motivating enough moment for the child to make a choice. The child may not be hungry or may not want either of the options provided. Try again at another meal or during play time with different choices for toys, games, or activities.
- This activity can be modified to use visual supports that show a photograph, icon, or drawing of their cereal choices once the child is able to choose from the actual object.

## Activity #2 Offering Two Items with a Visual Support

- In this activity, a visual support is introduced to help the child recognize that a picture can represent the item they want to choose. This means that you’ll have to use a printed picture of the items you plan to offer the child. This can also be done during daily routines such as getting dressed, eating breakfast, story time, or play time. Let’s use play time as an example here.
- To help support the learning of this skill, it will be important to arrange the environment ahead of time so that the child’s toys are not all within reach. After all, if the child can simply grab the toy they want, there is no real need for the child to communicate their choice to their caregiver! In this situation, it would be best to keep toys stored on a shelf out of the child’s reach, but where the child can still see the items.
- In this activity, we’ll want to include two or more choices. Remember, this can include one obvious preference and one toy that the child does not enjoy that much or it can include two preferences. We’ll use an example of a toy car and a ball.
- Place a picture of a toy car and a picture of a ball in front of the child.
- Ask the child, “What do you want?”
- If the child responds by indicating a choice either by handing over the picture, pointing to the picture, or communicating their choice verbally or through AAC, provide the chosen toy immediately.
- If the child does not respond, you can prompt the child by:
  - Holding up the picture of the toy car and the ball and moving them closer to the child.
  - Repeat “What do you want?” (If the child uses echolalia, you can change this to “I want...” and waiting).
- If the child responds, provide the toy immediately.
- If the child does not respond, it may not be a motivating enough moment for the child to make a choice. The child may not be interested in playing at the moment or may not want either of the options provided. Try again at another time with different choices for toys, games, or activities or during a different routine.

- Be sure to practice this skill with different items and in different settings to promote generalization. This will mean varying the choices and not using the same objects or activities each time, or practicing the skill in a different setting where the options are different.

## Activity #3 Using a Choice Board

- In this activity, the child will be provided with a series of visual supports. These photographs, icons, or drawings are often printed and velcroed to a board or folder so that it can easily travel with the child. The point of this activity is that the child is making a choice with only the visual support and cannot directly see the actual items, objects, or activities that are offered. For example, this can be a great option when sitting in the living room but making a choice about something to do outside or elsewhere in the house. After all, you can't really bring the swing set from the backyard into the living room just to make a choice! Let's use the example of making a choice for outdoor play options while still inside.
- In this activity, we'll want to include two or more choices. Remember, this can include one obvious preference and one activity that the child does not enjoy that much or it can include two preferences. We'll use an example of swinging, riding a bicycle, and playing basketball.
- Place the choice board with the pictures of a swing, a bicycle, and basketball hoop in front of the child.
- Ask the child, "What do you want?"
- If the child responds by indicating a choice either by handing over the picture, pointing to the picture, or communicating their choice verbally or through AAC, take the child outside and to the desired activity immediately.
- If the child does not respond, you can prompt the child by:
  - Moving the choice board closer to the child.
  - Repeat "What do you want?" (If the child uses echolalia, you can change this to "I want..." and waiting).
  - Tapping on each picture.
- If the child responds, take the child outside and to the desired activity immediately.
- If the child does not respond, it may not be a motivating enough moment for the child to make a choice. The child may not be interested in playing at the moment or may not want any of the options provided. Try again at another time with different choices for toys, games, or activities or during a different routine.
- Be sure to practice this skill with different items and in different settings to promote generalization. This will mean varying the choices and not using the same objects or activities each time, or practicing the skill in a different setting where the options are different.

## Social Skill Extension Activity:

Once the child is able to make a choice with objects, visual supports, or simply a list of options during different activities and routines at home with various family members, it will be important to generalize this skill to activities out in the community such as making a choice at a restaurant or at the grocery store. The process may be very similar with holding up an actual item as in Activity #1 or visual supports and choice boards as in Activities #2 and #3. An added element to this activity, however, is interacting with other people besides family members. For example, this means making a choice from several items at a restaurant and then communicating that order to a waiter or cashier. The child has the ability to practice making a choice and then practice using phrases such as, "Can I have a Coke, please?" Keep in mind that restaurants and grocery stores can often have a long list of options to choose from so if the child is not able to choose from ALL the items or finds too many choices overwhelming, limit their choices to just two or three items and use a combination of items the child clearly enjoys and items the child does not enjoy. Remember, the more you can vary every part of the practice, the better! Mixing up the communication partners, the setting, and the items requested will all help children to 'generalize' the skill and be able to use it independently.

## Links to resources on our website!

- Autism Q&A: Introduction to Teaching Young Children with Autism ...  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1077>
  - Functions of Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/...to.../functions.cfm>
  - How To Video Series - VCU Autism Center for Excellence  
[https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how\\_to/](https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/)
- vAutism Q & A: Providing Choices  
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1194>