Giving Children Choices

Adults don't like to be forced to do things. Neither do children. We all like to have choices. Give children real choices. Asking a child whether he wants to clean up his room or get a whipping is not a real choice - it is a threat. We might instead ask a child if he wants to play music on the radio while cleaning his room or would rather have it quiet. We might even ask the child if they would rather get their room cleaned up right now or would rather wait until after dinner. (If the child decides to clean the room after dinner, we need to remember to enforce the commitment!)

Even young children should be given choices. For example, at bedtime a parent might ask a child, "As soon as you are ready for bed I can read you a story or sing you a song. What do you prefer?" Of course an infant can only make limited choices - but even young children might have preferences. If that child (past 6 months of age) favors carrots over potatoes, let her eat the carrots.

Wise parents set some limits on choices. We allow young children to decide which shirt they want to wear to school but we set limits on bedtimes. We allow teens to go out with their friends but we ask them to be home by a certain time.

As children get older, we allow them more freedom in their choices. For example, a teenager who hates to clean his room might be allowed to clean it only once a week. "Would you be willing to clean your room every Saturday and I won't bother you the rest of the week?" Teens are also given more freedom about choosing their friends and how they spend their time. That does not mean that teens are allowed to hang out whenever they want. The normal place for teens to be when they are not in school or at work is at home. (See the unit on Setting Limits.)

Some things should be decided by the child. In matters of style it is better not to start a battle. You may think your child's hair is too long or too short or that baggy pants look ridiculous. (Probably our parents had some of the same concerns about our style.) Allow the child freedom to express herself or himself in areas that are not unsafe or immoral. Do not panic when some of those choices are very different from ones we make.

We can prepare children to make good choices by providing information. For example, when a child is thinking about buying expensive shoes, we might ask them if they are willing to consider some factors in their decision. We can encourage them to think how the cost of the shoes equates with weeks of allowance or hours of work. We might ask them what alternatives they have considered. We can ask them how important those shoes are relative to other purchases that could be made with the same money. It is not helpful to pester children but we can help them learn a sensible way of making choices. If we want our children to be good decision-makers when they become adults, we should give them many appropriate opportunities to make decisions along their journey to adulthood.
Applications:

What choices do you currently allow your children to make?

Does each of your children have the opportunity to make choices appropriate for his or her development?

Are there choices your children make that you consider foolish?

Is it an area of personal style where you should allow more freedom?

Or is it an area where you should have a discussion?

How can you initiate a discussion that will be productive? Can you invite your child to share his or her perspective? Can you share your ideas in a non-accusing way at a time when you are both in good spirits?

Sometimes we allow children to make bigger choices after they have shown that they are wise in making small choices. For example, a teen who wants to be trusted to go with friends to a concert needs to have demonstrated responsibility about making good choices. A parent may need to say occasionally, "I think I will be ready to trust you with going to the concert when you have shown that I can trust you to come home on time and to make good choices." Because trust is earned over time, a 14-year-old will probably not be allowed the same freedom as a 17-year-old.