

Use Choice-Making Strategies to Enhance Self Expression:

Teens and Young Adults with Disabilities

By

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Roger pushes a grocery cart at the local market along with his community coach. Roger uses an I'pad with a list of grocery items in 'notes' to help him remember the food he wants and needs for the upcoming week. When Roger approaches the cereal aisle he does so with a bounce in his step. As he reaches for his favorite brand of cereal, Honey Oats, he smiles. Roger gently places the box into the cart along with the other items. Next, proceeds to the check-out lane where he unloads the cart. With each item he picks up, he stops, he smiles, and then scans each product carefully. He enjoys the beeping sound the scanner makes. After Roger pays for his groceries, he and his community coach heads back to his apartment, where each item has a special place in the kitchen cabinet or refrigerator. Although this complete task may seem like a chore or trivial to most of us, Roger enjoys shopping for his groceries and participates as if shopping were an art. This illustration to me, reflects the heart of *choice-making* and self-determination, even for a young adult who is significantly disabled with autism.

I learned how important the act of *choice-making* has been in my son Trent's life when he faced challenges to adapt, practiced daily life skills to live and work in the community, and aspired to develop his own interests. Parents of young adults

with developmental disabilities and autism who participated in my research also confirmed the similar challenges they had and the necessity that *choice-making offers*. Fortunately, with support to make choices, these young adults became major players to effectively enlarge their world.

The heart of communicating a preference, desire, or need can be strengthened through *choice-making* strategies. I believe that *choice-making* is a powerful way to address a teen or young adult's needs, teach emotional regulation, and pursue personal goals.

How is choice-making strategy connected to communication? The act of *choice-making* is communication. There are many ways a person communicates: verbally, using sign language, or making the most of the many available communication tools, etc. Popular aids are helping people with disabilities to communicate and some of these include: an I'touch, an I-pad and I'phones. It is also important to note that we communicate most effectively nonverbally, about 65% in body language, and 35% using words. Hence, there are many different ways to communicate.

Yet, let's examine the reason for communicating? Initiating or responding to another person in an interaction for the purposes of satisfying one's own needs is communication. This relationship is

described as “instrumental” and the extent of satisfying one’s own needs reflects security. However, when needs go unmet, instability is the result (Wolman, 1981). Regardless of the functioning level of your son or daughter, there are great benefits in using *choice-making* strategies.

Suppose your teen has had limited community experiences because of an inability to develop pro-social behaviors within diverse settings and among unfamiliar people. It may appear too difficult to pursue *choice-making* when so much attention must be focused toward managing behaviors? There is always a place to start. Meeting the individual at the point of where he or she is in development and using *choice-making* can in fact, improve one’s behavior. *Choice-making* can be used at any age and any level of development.

Often before youth can initiate making a choice they must lean on us for guidance and support in these two ways:

1) exposure and experiences in order to understand the benefits of making a choice. For example, if John has

never had an experience of hearing or seeing a piano, how can John choose the hobby of learning how to play the piano?

2) two or more options must be offered in order to select.

Also, the character of options presented by us, parents and advocates, is foundational before the individual can make a choice. What counts is what we say to our youth about the benefits of experiences they have encountered or will encounter. What counts is what we say to our youth about how well they can handle or have handled specific situations, such as, choosing when to ask for help. Youth with disabilities have a role to play in the process of *choice-making* and the outcome too, especially when they know that they do have a say about something that is important to them.

Additionally, your teen or young adult’s own self-talk about a particular situation is significant, such as, thinking first why “this choice is good” for me or why “this option is bad” for me.

See the table on the next page for the three stages that are part of process of choice making.

Here is a story of Elena and how she used



choice-making to manage test taking in her courses. Elena has a learning disability. When she first entered high school she really wanted to fit in with all the other students, and make new friends. No longer did she want all the students to know that she had special accommodations in doing her assignments and tests as in previous years. She believed this was a new school, a new year, and a new beginning.

When the date for scheduled assignments and tests arrived, no matter how hard Elena tried, she began to shut down emotionally. Although Elena applied good *choice-making* skills in studying and was always prepared, her anxiety increased. This became a real problem because she was now making much lower grades because of her 'doubts'.

Elena's teachers and parents helped her see how certain new options might decrease her fear during the tests. Elena considered the suggestions and was willing to try them. Along with her teachers and parental support, Elena chose to: 1) take the test without the limits of a time and, 2) sit in a darkened classroom alone without harsh overhead lights. She took her tests during elective classes so her peers would not know she was still receiving accommodations. Almost immediately Elena started getting good grades overall because of the choices she made.

I see our role as parents, school personnel, or other advocates is to guide youth through a process of considering the benefits and consequences of choices. The choice making process can facilitate teens and young adults understanding:

- about their needs,
- about their reactions to previous

experiences,

- in making a choice in the moment,
- of feelings about specific relationships and situations,
- about how a particular choice can be good or bad,
- about a vision of where one wants to go.

The *choice-making* process is much different from:

- 1) How Elena once thought about herself, based on how she thought others saw her. Elena believed that her peers might ridicule her as they had in the past because she had special privileges in her classes.
- 2) What others told Elena about how she should act. To fit in, Elena pretended to have it all together even during stressful events, yet, she unsuccessfully failed to hide her anxiety.
- 3) The messages that Elena received from others about who she is. In the past Elena had worried that her peers might call her awful names because of her disability. Elena is learning the truth about herself. She is incredibly a bright and beautiful teenager. And she is a person who also has challenges with her disability. But by making good choices she can reach better outcomes, speaking on her own behalf.

When teens and young adults have opportunities to practice *choice-making* skills, remember it is not all about their behaving well or responding according to everyone else's rules. Nor, is it about everything turning out perfectly. Rather, it is about our youth using *choice-making* skills to better know themselves, their rights, and their freedom to express on their own behalf--what happens in life. "We are healthiest when we are caught in

a beautiful balance between ourselves as we are and the ghost images of our future.” (Brown & Keller, 1979, p. 29).

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References

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The three stages that are part of the decision making process

Stage one	Stage two	Stage three
The teen or young adult faces a situation, event, or has a need to be fulfilled or resolved.	<p>What we (parents or advocates) say to youth about their situation, event, or need and the possible options.</p> <p>The rationale for the selection of a choice.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>What youth say about their situation, event or need and the possible options to consider.</p>	<p>Choice(s) are made.</p> <p>Positive Benefits can be noted and remembered using: photos, social stories, accomplishment list, etc. Experiencing the outcomes of choices that improved his or her personal benefit.</p> <p>Also, note consequences from a not so good choice and possible new actions to try later.</p>



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