

## Language & Learning

### Positive Parenting

#### Helping Your Child Make Choices

Even very young children want to have a little control over what happens in their environment. Babies cry, smile, vocalize and gesture in order to explore or to make things happen. Between 10 and 12 months of age, infants express their wants in very intentional ways. They lift their arms to be picked up or point to a desired object, or hand something to mommy. This happens because these infants have figured out that their actions cause adults to act. This important discovery opens up a world of communication. Toddlers quickly learn which actions or language allow them to gain some power. Of course, parents have to decide just how much control any child can have over himself or herself or the family. Studies of parents of deaf and hard of hearing children show that if parents and children communicate easily, then parents can find positive ways of helping children take part in decision making. If communication is difficult, then parents tend to make many more of the decisions. When this happens, young children can begin to use inappropriate behaviors to demand some control.

Communication is the key to helping children begin to make choices independently, so your family's choice of communication strategies is very important. You can give your baby or toddler the chance to make a choice even without words or sentences, however. When you bring a toy in response to a cry and hold it near the baby's hand, you are essentially saying, "Do you want this, or do you want something else?" When your baby reaches for the toy or smiles, that is a choice. If you hold two toys out to a slightly older baby, and the baby reaches for one or the other, your baby has made choice. You can talk or sign about that choice, saying, "Oh you want teddy."

You will know which choices you tend to offer your baby the most often. If you are signing, put the signs for those choices on your list of Signs to Learn Right Away. As your baby grows and attends to more and more, your list will grow, too. If your baby is learning to listen, emphasize the idea of choosing and the words for the choices. Be sure that your baby knows what is happening. You will need to use language like, "Which one?" and "You picked \_\_\_\_\_." The situation, your questioning face and voice, and the result of getting the selected item or action will help your baby learn the language for making choices.

Of course, the choices you offer your baby are real choices. Water or juice can be a real choice of something to drink. Walking or riding in the stroller can be a real choice for a toddler. Daddy playing with blocks or reading a story can be a real choice of special together time. When your baby is deaf or hard of hearing, you must be sure that the choices are not only real, but are clearly understood. Misunderstanding can lead to false hope or confusion. Until you and your baby clearly understand the speech or signs for your choices, you can support the language by having real objects to point to, or gestures that represent actions.

Opportunities to make choices help children gain independence and confidence. Choice making is a useful positive parenting tool for avoiding behavior problems. Giving choices is respectful to your child, too. It recognizes a growing capability and the right of children to have at least a small "say" in their own lives. It also helps a child learn to make decisions and express preferences.

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Here are some examples of giving choices to babies at various ages.

**6 month old (spoken language):**

Baby turns away from a toy she and dad were playing with. Dad notices that she is losing interest. He brings out a different favorite toy and makes sound with it. Baby looks interested again and dad says, "Oh, you hear it. You like your clown." As baby reaches for it, dad comments, "You want clown."

**6 month old (sign language):**

Baby turns away from toy she and dad were playing with. Dad notices she is losing interest. He offers a brightly colored set of toy keys. He brings it into her line of vision and signs on the toy, "Your keys. See? Keys." When baby grins and grabs, he signs, "You want keys!"

**10 month old (spoken language):**

Your infant is reaching up toward the toy shelf. You are not sure what she wants. You pick two toys from the shelf and offer this simple choice. You bring the toys into your baby's line of vision and say, "You want your doggie or the mirror?" As the baby picks one, you affirm the choice saying, "You want the mirror. See the baby? Hi baby!"

**10 month old (sign language):**

Your infant is reaching up toward the toy shelf. You are not sure what she wants. You pick two toys from the shelf and set them on a lower shelf. You sign near the toys, "you want doggie? Or mirror? Which? Your face conveys a question expression and your body makes a shift to show the choice you are offering.

**12 month old (spoken language)**

It is breakfast time and you offer a bite of oatmeal to your baby. He shoves it away. You say, "you don't want cereal. Want some peaches? Yummy. Mmmmm. Here comes the airplane aaaaaaaaaa. Open up!" In this example, you just gave your little one an alternate food and respected his "don't want." You also gave nice opportunities to listen.

**12 month old (sign language)**

It is breakfast time and you offer a bite of oatmeal to your baby. He shoves it away. You shake your head and sign, "you don't want." Then you bring the peaches up in his line of vision. You sign, "Good peaches! Want a bite." He opens his mouth and you smile and give him a bite commenting, "Yummy peaches." In this example, you have respected his "don't want" and have made sure to present his new choice visually with supportive body language.

**18 month old (spoken language)**

Your toddler is playing with Lego blocks and is tired of stacking. You sit down and offer a verbal choice. "Can we make an airplane? Or a choo choo? Look, my airplane goes up up up! I hear your train say choo choo." Toddlers start to do a lot of pretending on a fairly realistic level at this age. You can encourage this pretending by showing the child your pretend and talking about it. You will also be exposing the child to some good language and listening models.

**18 month old (sign language)**

Your toddler is playing with Lego blocks and is tired of stacking. You sit down and offer a signed choice. "Wanna make airplanes? Watch! Airplane up up up. You wanna try it?" Sign airplane right on the toy as the little one begins to pretend. Next sign, "now hook them. Look a train!" Sign train right on the Lego. Toddlers start to do a lot of pretending on a fairly realistic level at this age. You can encourage this pretending by showing the child your pretend and talking about it. You will also be exposing the child to some good visual language models.