

Shared Control

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A small boy is sent to bed by his father...

[Five minutes later]

"Da-ad..."

"What?"

"I'm thirsty. Can you bring me a drink of water?"

"No. You had your chance. Lights out."

[Five minutes later]

"Da-aaaad..."

"WHAT?"

"I'm THIRSTY...Can I have a drink of water??"

"I told you NO! If you ask again I'll have to punish you severely!!"

[Five minutes later]

"Daaaa-aaaAAAAD..."

"WHAT??!!!"

"When you come in to punish me severely me, can you bring me a drink of water?"

Children from their earliest age begin to display a need to develop and become autonomous, no matter how much control their parents try to take. Autonomy is an important component of early competence. Many children resist being controlled not simply to be obstinate or difficult with parents, but out of a motivation to be autonomous and to be able to feel independent in the outcomes that affect their well-being. Every two year old's favorite word is 'no', as they display their yearning toward autonomy.

As we have discussed in the past, it is vital to create limits and direction to our children. However, just like most strategies in parenting, it must be done with a balance. A helpful strategy that can be utilized in order to have our children comply with our instructions and at the same time feel good about themselves is by finding opportunities to grant them shared control. Instead of always giving demands and always trying to get the child to do what we want them to do, it is helpful when possible to give the child the opportunity to choose the instruction that they would like to follow at the moment. Developmental psychologists have observed that either we can give the child control on our terms, or they will take it on their terms. Parents who remember to provide a lot of choices throughout the day, tend to see that they get the most cooperation from their children, as the child has partial control (his choosing) on our terms (as we had come up with the choices).

Let us take the example of a classroom teacher. Have you ever seen a teacher take control of a child with, "You get yourself to the time-out area right now! And you stay there until I tell you to come back!"? How long does it take for the child to regain control? Almost immediately, as the student moves as slowly as he possibly can toward the time out area. And once the student is in the time out area, he is tapping, rocking the chair, humming, and making inappropriate sounds. The teacher can no longer work with the other children, having become totally involved with the offending student, who has now, on his own terms, taken total control.

Compare this situation to one which the teacher knows how to share control. She offers the student a portion of control upfront, "on her terms", so that the student's self respect remains intact. "Would you rather work quietly with us, or would you rather be in the timeout area? It's really up to you. If you decide to go to the timeout, please come back as soon as you can handle it. I'd love to have you back."

It's obvious which teacher brings out the best in the students, which teacher goes home more angry and tired. Teachers and parents who grant

children shared control experience more fun in their disciplining and develop more cooperative, independent, and self respected students and children.

This strategy must be carefully administered. We should never give a choice on an issue that is not acceptable to the parent or the child. For example, if we say to the child that he can either clean his room and come eat at the Shabbos table or he could have the Shabbos meal in his room. If eating the Shabbos table in his room is not acceptable for the parent, then this choice is not a good choice. Choices are usually not helpful when used as a threat or a manipulation in disguise. Rather the backdrop of the message should be “I’m on your side. There is something I want you to (or not do), but rather than giving you an order, I would like to give you the opportunity to own the choice independently.”

The following are strategies in creating Choices

- Never give a choice on an issue that might cause a problem for you or for anyone else.
- If the child doesn’t decide in ten seconds, decide for him or her.
- Only give choices that fit with your value system.

Some examples of little choices

- Would you like to wear your coat or carry it?
- Would you like to do your homework and then eat dinner, or eat dinner and then do your homework?
- Will you have these chores done tomorrow? Or do you need an extra day to get them finished?
- Are you having peas or carrots as your vegetable tonight?
- Are you going to bed now? Or would you like to wait 15 minutes?
- Can you stay with us and stop that, or do you need to leave for a while and come back when you are sweet?
- Are you going to put your pajamas on first or brush your teeth first?
- Will you be home at 10:00? Or do you need an extra half hour with your friends?
- Are you guys going to stop bickering? Or would you rather pay me for having to hear it?

If a child a child has strong negative feelings about doing something, they are not likely to be receptive to any choices. Therefore, it is helpful to give her full respect for her negative feelings: “Wow, I can see on your face how much you hate even the thought of taking that medicine.” Once the daughter feels that the parent understands her and is on her side, then she will be more emotionally ready to consider the words of the parent. “So honey, what could make it less awful for you-taking it with juice or ginger ale?” or “Should I give it to you or would you rather take it yourself”....as the choices can become very creative. The point is, some things are easier to

swallow if someone understands how hard it is for us, and if we have a small say and how it goes down.

In the last few years, the psychology world has been throwing around the word “oppositional”, a term used to a child who rebels the demands of authority. Studies have been illustrating that giving choices to these types of children is a very helpful strategy in getting them to comply. I want to suggest that some of the issues that we find with defiant children are a result of their attempt to exercise their need for autonomy; but have been either repeatedly rejected by “general sergeant” parents who constantly feel the need to control as they value obedience over their children, or have been given too much freedom from their “permissive parents” who have given in to the demands of their children and are inconsistent in following through on the instructions that they give. Studies have shown that creating the right balance between limits, consistency, and granting the child choice when it is viable, is the correct balance in helping the disciplining experience be more successful, and will also help the development of our children be more meaningful. By granting opportunities for the child to feel autonomous, we will give them an opportunity to acquire a sense of efficacy, and develop motivational and assertive behaviors that will enable them to control outcomes that affect the quality of their life.