

Using Choices and Questions to Guide and Teach Children about Good Food Choices

By Lisa C. Greene, MA CFLE

In the live workshop as well as in the video for Session One of the follow up course, we discussed using choices and questions as much as possible (and developmentally appropriate) to:

- share control
- set limits
- provide opportunities for children to make affordable mistakes

This is often the hardest part of parenting: recognizing that our children have free will and allowing them to make affordable mistakes. But this is critical if we want to raise kids who know how to think and who understand "cause and effect".

When children know, deep down, that their decisions will affect them, both good and bad, they are more likely to think carefully about the decisions they make including around their medical care. Of course the way we respond when they make choices, both good and bad, matters as we discussed in class.

Using choices and questions:

- Reduces power struggles
- Encourages children to think
- Shifts responsibility to the child
- Empowers children to be involved in their own decisions and responses
- Helps avoid blame and rebellion when things go wrong
- Provides learning opportunities when the price tag is affordable
- Prepares kids for the real world
- Implies: "You're capable. I believe in you. I trust you."

Here is a story about how I have used choices and questions with our children around an important issue for CF: proper nutrition and getting in enough calories:

One of the biggest challenges with our kids is around food. Our kids are supposed to eat about 4300 calories a day. And while we adults try our best NOT to eat 3300 calories a day, for a little kid, it's hard to get that much food down. So this can be quite a power struggle at times.

And when one demands, the other resists. So the more we try to *make* a child eat certain foods or a certain amount, the more the child will naturally resist.

So we have to be thoughtful about how we motivate our kids to eat and one way is with **choices**. With younger kids, we can give two choices like "Do you want pancakes or waffles?" "Do you want one pancake or two?" "Maple syrup or strawberry jelly?"

But as our kids get older, we'll start to give them choices using *questions*. Here's an example from our home. One morning, I asked the kids what they wanted for breakfast and they both said "cold cereal." The problem is: it doesn't have very many calories.

So now *I* had a choice. I could say "NO, it's not nutritious enough" and get a fight. Or, I could allow *them* to decide and take this opportunity to teach them by giving them more choices and asking *questions*. So, I said, "Okay. You can have cereal but that's only 150 calories and you need 900 for breakfast. Plus, you need some fat, and protein and fruit. So what else will you eat?"

Jacob pipes right up with, "Okay, I'll take peanut butter for my protein and a banana for my fruit. Plus, with a cup of whole milk, that's just about right." And this is when he was 10! And, Kasey decided to have some bacon instead of the peanut butter so everyone was happy. And we took a picture of this moment so we could share it with you.



What I realized, through this experience, was that if *I* was the one making all the decisions about what they eat then I probably wouldn't be so involved in *teaching* them about fat and calories and good nutrition. I would just prepare the meals and expect them to eat it. *And* end up with a lot of control battles over food.

But with *choices and questions*, I am less likely to have power struggles *and* I have a lot more opportunities to *teach* them along the way. This works exactly the same way with many other issues we have with our kids including homework, chores, and of course medications.

We *empower* them with accurate information about why something is important *for them*, *teach* them the steps they need to take to meet the goal, and use *choices* and *questions* to help lead them along in a thinking state.

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