



20 October 2020

## You have choices

POSITIVE PARENTING



by Michael Grose

**W**hat drives kids' behaviour? Is it impulse, mood, emotion, age or genes that cause kids to be sociable and safe or unsociable and risky?

The motivating forces behind kids' actions are as complex as the many behavioural theories that have done the rounds over the years. Psychiatrist Sigmund Freud suggested that most behaviour is driven by internal desires, which were difficult to control. "Boys will be boys!"

His colleague Alfred Adler believed that behaviour is driven by the need to find a place within our groups. "Would someone pay me some attention!"

Development psychologist Jean Piaget suggested that children's behaviour was largely governed by their stage of development. "It's just a stage she's going through."

All theories have validity but they neglect to highlight something that we've always known but not recognised enough – that kids choose how they behave. Their choices may be negatively impacted by tiredness, hunger, or irritability but ultimately, they make a decision to act in certain ways, or step back to let their impulses take over.

There are caveats. A hungry, overtired three year old who is being annoyed by a sibling is unlikely to make a reasoned choice about how they respond. Lashing out, a screech for parental help or an unrestrained tantrum are a more likely response. Parent common sense comes to the fore in determining how to respond to their child when mitigating factors are at play.

### "Good choice, Harry"

When a young child is kind to a sibling or friend a parent can praise the behaviour ("It was great to see you be kind, Harry") or the choice ("Good choice, Harry").

When parents focus on the decisions kids make we teach them that they have a say in their behaviour. We reach out to their pre frontal cortex – the part of their brain responsible for reasoning – and say, "You're in charge of how this child behaves. Good for you as you chose well." Continual reinforcement of choices over time is likely to have a strong impact on how a child perceives himself.

Reinforcement of choices places the locus on control on the child, rather than on external factors such as mood, peers and gender as likely causes of poor behaviour.

### "You have choices"

A child who misbehaves at home or in social situations can be reminded "You have choices." It helps if kids experience the consequences of their poor choices rather than be sheltered from them. A child who refuses, which is a choice, to clean up a mess left in the living room may lose those items for a period of time. If they value those items then they may make different choices next time around. Choices teach responsibility, when they are coupled with behavioural consequences.

### "Can you make a smarter choice?"

A parent may need to outline some of the choices – walk away from conflict, come to a them for help, do nothing – but ultimately the decision is a child's to make. Similarly, going over poor choices with a child or young person in a quiet moment after an event can help them reflect and reset their brain for better choices in the future. "What behaviour can you choose next time?" is a helpful question to ask a child or young person who got themselves into a behavioural pickle.

### "Choose between these two"

Anecdotal evidence suggests that approximately one in three children don't like to be told what to do. These kids value control and use resistance strategies such as arguing, negotiation or procrastination to assert their authority. These children can be wearing for parents, but the flipside is, that they generally make assertive adults as long as their spirits aren't dampened when they are young. The use of choices works well with children who value control over their own actions.

It's best to give them a choice between two options, which is an illusion of power. "If you stay inside you need to be quiet. If you want to play noisy games you need play outside." Kids will usually take one of the options offered, provided they're reasonable, as they feel they are calling the shots.

The focus on choices can start when children are toddlers continuing into adolescence and beyond. It's an empowering concept that prepares kids to live fully in the civilised society that they will be entering. It balances personal empowerment with personal responsibility, two character traits highly valued by schools, community groups and employers.

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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.

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