

The importance of choice for developing communication skills and life skills

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Speech and Language therapists often talk about the importance of functional communication and choices. One of the elements of functional communication is having something interesting or important to communicate about. Making choices creates natural communication opportunities. Having a bit more control over what happens also makes life more interesting, giving more things to talk about.

We make choices every day. We choose what time to set the alarm. We choose whether to get up and have a shower, or turn over and have another five minutes sleep. We choose what to wear, what to have for breakfast, what time to leave the house.

These are all choices which, as adults, we have learned to make. Sometimes we choose wisely, sometimes less so, but we understand that we have choices, and that the decisions we make will have consequences.



As parents, we begin by making those decisions for our children, gradually handing over age appropriate responsibilities as the child matures towards adulthood. Often though, teenagers who have Down syndrome have lives which are much more parent-directed than other teenagers. This happens for the best of reasons. It may be difficult for a child who has a disability to

understand what is required, or to understand the options available. It may just be habit. The child is used to being told what to do, and parents and teachers are used to giving plenty of direction. Teenagers who have Down syndrome may not have the language skills to demand a measure of autonomy the way other teenagers would. They may not realise that they even have a choice.

Sometimes behavioural difficulties arise when teenagers no longer want to be told what to do, but lack the skills for negotiating new responsibilities.

It may help to go through all of the everyday decisions in your child's day, and identify who makes decisions right now. Listing all of the choices down one side of the paper, then noting which decisions are made by the teenager, by the parent and by the school can help. It's fine that some of the decisions are made by school (uniform, start time, etc). It's natural that many decisions are made by parents (e.g. We have to leave the house by 8.30 so that everyone gets to school and work on time). Decisions are not made in isolation. We live and work with together with other people, and everyone's needs have to be taken into account.

Sometimes, when going through this process, you realise that very few decisions are made by the teenager, and if that is the case, it could be time to look at promoting decision making and self advocacy. This can be scary. None of us make wise decisions all of the time, and watching your child live through the consequences of a poor decision is painful. However, taking responsibility for small decisions and having those decisions respected helps your teenager learn to communicate opinions and to prepare for adulthood, when they will be asked to make bigger decisions.

If your teenager is not used to making decisions, these need to start small, with clear parameters. For example, when choosing what to have for breakfast, this is a choice between porridge and toast, rather than a licence to begin the day with chocolate ice cream!

On other things, you may need to negotiate and be

flexible. For example, you may want your child to take a packed lunch to school every day, as you know they are unlikely to make good choices in the school canteen or in the town. This is understandable, but if all of the other teenagers in the class are out getting chips, this decision may be restricting social and communication opportunities at lunchtime. Maybe you could compromise by allowing your child to choose one or two days in the week where they buy lunch? The food choices may be less healthy, but the practice at waiting in a queue, using money, talking with the others, managing getting back to class on time, etc. make it a valuable exercise.

Controlling your child's choices and environment to keep them safe is natural and healthy. Supporting your teenager to make some of the decisions involves relinquishing some of the control. This requires a bit of risk assessment.

Ideally, risk assessment is about minimising any risks by thinking ahead. What could go wrong? What skills will your teenager need to learn to manage something successfully, and how can those skills be safely taught? Sometimes, the consequences of a mistake are not too serious, and learning by experience may be possible.

Figuring this out means thinking through the 'what ifs'.

- What if your child doesn't make it back in time for afternoon school? They may get a telling off, or a detention, but this is a learning experience. If you are late, there are consequences!
- What if they get run over? Obviously, this is a much bigger issue, so if the others go into town to buy lunch, it might be necessary to work towards joining them by practicing on the weekends for a while, finding safe crossing places and doing some traffic awareness work.
- What if your child chooses unhealthy food? Most teenagers choose unhealthy food at least some of the time. Maybe the occasional burger and chips for lunch can be balanced somewhat with soup and fruit salad for dinner? Maybe they can earn extra pocket money for buying lunch by doing chores in the garden or helping to walk the dog, so that some extra exercise is built in?

Being worried about the consequences of poor decisions is natural, but for most of us, making small mistakes is how we learn. What is the worst that can happen if your daughter decides to have her hair cut short? She may like it, she may not, but it will grow back in time, and she learns the valuable lesson that



she is in charge of her hair, and by extension, her body.

What is the worst that can happen if your son gets up late and forgets to bring his swimming kit to school? It may mean sitting and watching when all his classmates have fun in the pool, but it also gives him the chance to develop strategies like getting up on time and having a list of the things he needs to take. These are skills he won't easily develop if he is never asked to take responsibility for organising his morning, and a keen swimmer won't want to forget his kit a second time!

Promoting decision making helps your child to take a measure of control which is essential to wellbeing as an adult. It can be difficult. It's a transition, and all transitions are challenging. But developing a sense of both: 'I am in charge of me', and 'it's not the end of the world if I make a mistake' is a healthy step for all teenagers as they transition into adult life.