

# Choice Making Opportunities for Students

## Module 4

Lee Kern, PhD  
Jennifer K. Parks, MEd

Lehigh University



### *Series Editors*

Irene Walker-Bolton  
Virginia Department of  
Education  
Richmond, VA

Robert A. Gable  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA

Stephen W. Tonelson  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA

Pat Woolard  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, VA

Copyright (c) 2012

This document can be reproduced and distributed for educational purposes.

No commercial use of this document is permitted.

Contact the Division of Special Education and Student Services prior to adapting or modifying this document for noncommercial purposes.

Virginia Department of Education Division of Special Education and Student Services

Web site: [www.doe.virginia.gov/special\\_ed](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed)

The Virginia Department of Education does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, national origin, religion, age, political affiliation, veteran status, or against otherwise qualified persons with disabilities in its programs and activities.

*Robert is a student identified with an emotional disability (ED) who is included in Mrs. Snyder's fifth grade general education classroom. When presented with independent seat work in language arts, Robert tends to engage in disruptive behaviors that escalate from task refusal to tantrums. Mrs. Snyder has already identified choice opportunities for all of her students, such as self-selection of peer partners for editing and the option to write essays on a computer or in a notebook with colored pens. To motivate Robert to complete his work and reduce problematic behaviors, Mrs. Snyder allows Robert to select the sequence of his assigned daily tasks. Mrs. Snyder has noticed that Robert now tends to stay on task longer and has fewer tantrums when he can choose the order of his work.*

*Nyasha is a withdrawn high school student identified with ED who is reluctant to participate in class and has failing grades. She is enrolled in a general education social studies class taught by Mr. Adams and Mr. Colon (the special education co-teacher). When designing curriculum units, Mr. Adams and Mr. Colon plan several assignment options associated with lessons in each unit. This allows them to offer students choice among a variety of activities. The activities have a range of point values, and students select any option they prefer, so long as they total to 100 points. Based on the activity choices of students in the class, Nyasha works in small groups with others who have also chosen the same activities. Nyasha reports that she finds class more interesting now that Mr. Adams and Mr. Colon allow students to choose the unit activities they want to complete. The teachers agree that Nyasha seems more motivated when choices are available, and they note her grades are improving.*

---

### **Description of the Choice Making Strategy**

Students with emotional and behavioral difficulties often display problematic behavior in school, have failing grades, and other social and academic concerns (Cullinan & Sabornie,

2004). As a result, research shows that these students experience poor post-school outcomes as compared to their peers with and without disabilities (Wagner & Cameto, 2004) and reduced quality of life (Sacks & Kern, 2008). It is critical that teachers use effective strategies, such as incorporating choice, to help these students perform better in school.

*Choice* can be defined as having the opportunity to select from one or more options (Jolivet, Wehby, Canale, & Massey, 2001). Providing students with choice is a versatile antecedent or preventative intervention to increase on-task behavior and reduce problem behaviors. Choices can be provided in many ways within the following broad categories: (a) choice of specific task, (b) choice of activity, (c) choice of the sequence of task completion, (d) choice of materials to use for the task, (e) choice of whom to work with on activities, (f) choice of where to work (e.g., desk, table, library), and (g) choice of time to complete work (e.g., morning or afternoon). Opportunities for students to make choices are easily implemented in the classroom and can be integrated within the curriculum and across content areas (Kern & State, 2009).

Why does choice work? Researchers have offered several possible explanations (Kern & State, 2009). One is that the ability to make a selection among options is a natural human attribute necessary for survival. A second reason suggests that choice allows students to engage in the more preferred option. Another hypothesis is preference changes, sometimes within short periods of time, and individuals learn, over time, that choice-making allows them to obtain what is preferred at that moment.

For students with ED, choice-making is well-matched to their behavioral needs. For example, students with ED may act out to escape a task or to obtain a preferred item. Further, problem behavior may occur because students feel a lack of control over their environment. Offering choices addresses such problem behaviors by allowing preferred options and providing the opportunity to actively influence their environment in an appropriate way (Kern & State, 2009; Shogren, Faggella-Luby, Bae, & Wehmeyer, 2004). A by-product of offering and honoring choices may be more predictable classroom experiences and better student teacher interactions (Jolivet et al., 2001; Morgan, 2006). Overall, choice-making opportunities help students with ED be more engaged and less disruptive in class.

### **Research that Supports the Choice Making Strategy**

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of choice interventions for individuals with a variety of disabilities. Here we focus on studies where participants were identified as school-age students with ED. Each of these examined the effect of choice on both student task engagement and across many disruptive behaviors (e.g., failing to follow directions, noise-making, calling out, leaving the classroom, destroying property).

In an early study of choice with ED students in the classroom, Dunlap et al. (1994) examined the effects of choice using authentic curricular activities with three elementary-age boys attending public school ED classrooms. In the first analysis, two students chose tasks from a menu of assignments the teacher had planned for the week. This was compared with a no-choice condition in which students were required to complete tasks in the order specified by the teacher. Increased task engagement and reduced disruptive behavior occurred for both students when choice was offered. Further, although assignments were the same across choice and no-choice

conditions, students tended to complain less about the assignments during the choice condition. In a second analysis, the researchers compared choice and no choice conditions using book read-alouds with a kindergarten student with ED. In the no-choice condition, however, the books selected by the teacher were those the student selected during choice condition. During the no-choice condition, off-task and disruptive behaviors were observed. During the choice condition, rates of disruption were reduced and task engagement increased. Therefore, the researchers concluded that the act of making a choice, not preferred tasks, accounted for the behavioral improvements. In summary, all three participants responded to the opportunity to make choices, resulting in improved task engagement and fewer disruptive episodes.

Jolivet et al. (2001) studied choice of task with three elementary-age male students in a self-contained math class during independent work time. The classroom teacher presented students with an array of tasks that needed to be completed that day and allowed students to select which task they wanted to complete first. This was compared with a no-choice condition in which the teacher told students which worksheet to complete first. During the choice condition, an increase in student task engagement and reduction of problem behavior was evidenced for two of the three participants. Further, two students completed more math problems, and all three students attempted more math problems, when they were able to choose their task. Therefore, choice may be an intervention to increase student motivation.

Kern, Mantegna, Vorndran, Bailin, and Hilt (2001) examined the effectiveness of choice of task sequence with three students, one of whom was a 7-year-old male identified as ED. The study was conducted in a hospital that provided treatment for children with severe behavior problems. The student selected the order in which he completed three pre-academic tasks. This was compared with a no-choice condition in which the teacher selected the order of task completion. Results showed increased engagement and fewer problem behaviors during the choice condition. This study demonstrated that the choice of task sequence procedure may offer a solution for teachers' concern that choice allows students to avoid completing all required work.

Kern, Bambara, and Fogt (2002) implemented a class-wide choice intervention with six middle-school boys in a self-contained science class at a private school for students with ED. In the choice condition, the class collectively made a group choice about which topic in the curriculum they wished to learn. In addition, individual choices were offered within daily lessons. In the no-choice condition, the teacher selected the lesson topic. Outcomes of the intervention were enhanced engagement and reduced disruptive behaviors overall across the class. Teacher feedback indicated that incorporating choice opportunities for the class was an acceptable modification. This study demonstrated that offering choices to a class is a feasible and economical strategy to increase task engagement.

Shogren et al. (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of 13 studies involving choice interventions for students with disabilities. Studies included male and female participants aged 4 through 50 years old with ED, autism, attention disorders, and intellectual disabilities in inclusive and segregated settings. Based their findings, the researchers concluded that choice interventions have moderate effectiveness by statistical standards but may have even greater clinical significance. That is, providing students with choice-making opportunities can result in noticeable differences in student behavior which is perceived as beneficial and valuable by students, teachers, and careproviders. Moreover, the authors acknowledged choice as an integral

aspect of self-determination and suggested that choice could be used to enhance other academic and behavioral strategies.

Overall, providing students with choice-making opportunities has been demonstrated to be both an effective and important strategy to improve behavior and engagement. However, much of the research on choice for students with EBD have been carried out in self-contained settings and in settings where school-wide and class-wide behavior management systems were well-established. Therefore, more research is needed to explore how choice strategies are implemented in inclusive general education settings and whether student behavior improvements can be maintained by consistent choice-making opportunities over time.

### **Circumstances under which the Choice Making Strategy would be Considered**

Choice is a particularly flexible strategy that is easily adapted to nearly any context. Embedding choice opportunities for students with ED can be implemented class-wide or be applied with students individually. Furthermore, choices can be presented in inclusive classrooms or self-contained settings and within any content area. Choices are appropriate for every type of classroom activity, including independent or group work. Essentially anywhere a teacher would make a decision about materials, activities, partnering, or timing, a choice can be presented to students (Kern & State, 2009).

#### *Guidelines for implementation/Task analysis of the steps:*

Although it may be easy for teachers to randomly insert choice opportunities whenever needed, following a few guidelines helps teachers maximize the use of choice within their lessons. Kern and State (2009) recommend a six-step plan:

1. Create a menu of choices you would be willing to provide your students. Areas of choices include (a) task, (b) activity, (c) task sequence, (d) materials, (e) with whom to work, (f) place to work, and (g) time to complete work. Teachers should be prepared to deliver the options selected by students.
2. Look through your choice menu before planning each particular lesson.
3. Decide what types of choices are appropriate for your lesson.
4. Decide where choice-making opportunities fit best in your lesson.
5. Incorporate the choices you decided as appropriate in your lesson plan.
6. Provide the choices as planned while delivering the lesson.

Although planning to incorporate choice in lessons may take additional time, teachers report it is worth the effort for the increase in task engagement and fewer issues with problem behavior (Jolivet, Stichter, & McCormick, 2002).

### **Cautions Regarding the use of Choice Making Strategy**

There are several cautions when using choice strategies (Jolivet et al., 2002). Offering students choices is not about providing every possible choice, nor is it just about choosing between doing the activity and not doing the activity. Choices should be planned and meaningful in the lesson and preserve the lesson objectives. Teachers should not see offering

choices as a loss of control or authority in the classroom. Rather, it should be viewed as a strategy for self-determination as well as an approach to improve the overall classroom climate. Teachers should not limit or remove choices in an effort to regain control when students with ED display inappropriate behaviors. Removing opportunities for choice may result in an increase in problem behavior.

---

## References

- Cullinan, D., & Sabornie, E. J. (2004). Characteristics of emotional disturbance in middle and high school students. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 12*, 157-167.
- Dunlap, G., dePerczel, M., Clarke, S., Wilson, D., Wright, S., White, R., et al. (1994). Choice making to promote adaptive behavior for students with emotional and behavioral challenges. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 27*, 505-518.
- Jolivette, K., Stichter, J. P., & McCormick, K. M. (2002). Making choices, improving behavior, engaging in learning. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 34*(3), 24-30.
- Jolivette, K., Wehby, J., Canale, J. & Massey, N. (2001). Effects of choice-making opportunities on the behavior of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders, 26*, 131-145.
- Kern, L., Bambara, L., & Fogt, J. (2002). Class-wide curricular modification to improve the behavior of students with emotional or behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders, 27*(4), 317-326.
- Kern, L., Mantegna, M. E., Vorndran, C. M., Bailin, D., & Hilt, A. (2001). Choice of task sequence to reduce problem behaviors. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions 3*, 3-10.
- Kern, L., & State, T. (2009). Incorporating choice and preferred activities into classwide instruction. *Beyond Behavior, 18*(2), 3-11.
- Morgan, P. (2006). Increasing task engagement using preference or choice-making. *Remedial and Special Education, 27*, 176-187.
- Sacks, G., & Kern, L. (2008). A comparison of quality of life variables for students with emotional and behavioral disorders and students without disabilities. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 17*, 111-127.
- Shogren, K. A., Faggella-Luby, M. N., Bae, S. J., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2004). The effect of choice-making as an intervention for problem behavior: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 6*(4), 228-237.

Wagner, M. & Cameto, R. (2004). The characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of youth with emotional disturbances. *NLTS2 Data Brief 3(2)*. National Center on Secondary Education and Transition.

**Website Links**

Intervention Central- Choice- Allowing the student to select task sequence

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/motivation/choice-allowing-student-select-task-sequence>

\*\*\*