It's hard to predict which ones they will select. With all those influences a child might encounter in their environment very early in their lives, it’s likely to be a dedicated teacher, caring Aunt Harriet, or a concerned police officer, but it’s just as likely to be anyone who is big, strong, attractive, charming, persuasive or popular.

Even well-meaning people can influence kids in negative ways. For example, what will happen when a conservative teacher tells your daughter that “nice” girls aren’t pushy? (There aren’t too many of those nice, non-pushy girls making it in Corporate America. And there are a lot of “nice,” non-assertive women being injured in relationships because they never learned they might have to stand up for themselves.) If your child is dedicated to pleasing and obeying, how well will she be able to evaluate the personal relevance of this information?

What happens when Aunt Dorothy, for whatever well-meaning reason, tells your son to quit taking his vitamins because they aren’t good for him? What happens when the baby sitter tries to make your children do something they are uncomfortable with and then threatens them to keep quiet? When an older friend offers your child a cigarette? When your son’s girlfriend puts pressure on him to become sexually involved with her? When one of your son’s buddies suggests that to be a man he has to get high with the boys? When the popular crowd at school challenges your child to participate in victimizing a classmate in order to be a part of their crowd? What happens when it’s time to make a lot of decisions that will affect your child’s future and well-being and you can’t be there to direct his or her choices?

Being a loving and concerned parent with the best of intentions, you probably answered those questions by saying, “I hope they’d make a good decision!” But how will they make a good decision, alone and under pressure, if they have only had training in doing what they’re told? Obedience, after all, is obedience. (And for the purpose of this article, this term refers to the tendency to respond, unquestioning, to another person’s request or command, either for the purpose of pleasing that person, or to avoid a painful consequence. Obedience to a set of internal principles or values is a whole other issue, a personal strength that rarely develops when kids grow up focused on pleasing others.) Since you cannot censor your child’s world or prevent him from encountering influences you might perceive as undesirable, why not shift the focus from encouraging obedience to arming your children with the skill and confidence to evaluate the people who can influence them?

Obedience is motivated by the reaction of other people. Regardless of how righteous the authority, the authority is still the decision maker. In this type of relationship, the child’s only choices are whether or not to comply. When the child obeys, she does so either to please the people in authority, which is good, isn’t it? That’s a great lesson for kids to learn if the people in authority are bright, moral, caring and able to always consider the child’s best interests along with their demands or requests. But kids can give the same kind of power, value and importance to strangers, peers, dates or others who might not be quite as invested as you in your child’s well-being. Kids are often exposed to a variety of people in uncontrolled or unsupervised environments very early in their lives. It’s hard to predict which ones they are going to perceive as an authority.

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Obedience is motivated by the reaction of other people. Regardless of how righteous the authority, the authority is still the decision maker. In this type of relationship, the child’s only choices are whether or not to comply. When the child obeys, she does so either to please the authority or to avoid a negative reaction, such as anger, disappointment, punishment, shaming, disapproval, emotional abandonment or an outright verbal or physical assault. These are the techniques that most of us experienced...
as children. And considering how effective these techniques were, it’s no wonder that so many of us simply pick them up and use them with our own kids. But at what cost?

If you’re having a hard time letting go of the idea of raising obedient kids, you may be stuck in something called all-or-nothing thinking (sometimes called black-and-white thinking). If so, you may suppose that the only alternative to having your kids obey is having them disobey. Not so! There is another response—one that looks surprisingly like obedience—that is not motivated by someone’s reaction. This response is called cooperation, and it’s probably a lot closer to what you’re really looking for when you say you want your kids to obey.

Children who behave cooperatively—instead of obediently—do so for some reason other than the reaction of someone they care about (or are afraid of). This point can be confusing, because cooperative behaviors can look the same as obedient behaviors. For example, the child who makes her bed so that “Mommy won’t spank me” and the child who makes her bed “because now I can invite my friends over” are both making their beds. There is a big difference, not only in motivation and payoffs, but also in the emotional energy of the relationship between parent and child.

A cooperative child can remain “safe” in the parent-child relationship because neither the relationship nor the child’s emotional safety is at risk. This child learns to recognize that certain meaningful outcomes—being able to use the phone, go outside, watch TV, have dessert or spend time with you, for example—will not be available until a certain chore is finished, an agreement is fulfilled or a task is completed. The child needs to make the cooperative choice to gain access to these privileges; he does not need to make the cooperative choice to keep from being hurt, emotionally or physically.

Obedient children quickly learn that they are safe, accepted, valued and worthwhile when they are doing what other people want. Cooperative children, on the other hand, may do things that are very pleasing to the people in their lives—and may be more likely to do so in an environment of emotional safety and acceptance. But their motivation is not exclusively the other person’s positive reaction (or the avoidance of the outcomes of their displeasure). In other words, because these kids don’t need to please—please to stay safe, they are therefore far less vulnerable to pressure from outside themselves—including peer pressure—than children who are raised to be obedient.

Obedient children get accustomed to someone else making all the decisions for them. Few parents would say they wanted helpless or irresponsible children, yet it may be hard for an obedient child to turn out otherwise. The third-grader who explained to her teacher that she was squinting because “my mother forgot to put my glasses on me this morning” saw something as crucial as her vision as somebody else’s responsibility! When I saw my street-wise fifth graders traumatized by having to choose which of two assignments to do first, I had to wonder how they would handle other decisions that could have a far more profound effect on their lives, like whether or not to get high with friends, become sexually active or stay in school—options that many of them were facing, even in elementary school!

A lot of these kids had a hard time connecting their choices with the outcomes. I frequently heard things like, “She made me do it,” “They started it,” or “It was all his fault!” from students who were in trouble because of some choice they had made. Remember, one of the payoffs for obedience is not having to accept responsibility for your behavior. Becoming a decision-maker means owning up to the choices you make and being willing to live with—and hopefully learn from—the outcomes of these choices.

Another drawback to raising obedient children is that obedient kids tend to be so focused on other people’s needs that they often make choices that jeopardize their own integrity, values or safety. One high school senior cheated on his SAT tests because his father threatened to disown him if he didn’t score high enough to get into Stanford. The fear of his father’s disappointment outweighed any internal inclination toward honesty this student may have harbored. In another instance, a little girl nearly bled to death because she was afraid to tell her mother she cut her hand using knives she was not supposed to use. And how many kids have skipped class, gotten high or had sex simply to avoid being ridiculed or rejected by their peers?

Because of a very human need to have some sense of control in one’s life, kids will often respond rebelliously when their needs come into conflict with the needs of someone they are supposed to obey—and, by the way, this happens far more frequently with authority figures like parents and teachers than ever happens with peers. An example is the college freshman who decided to hitch-hike across the country because her parents wouldn’t be able to find out what she was up to. Or the eighth-grade boy who told his counselor that he had decided to flunk middle school to show his parents that they couldn’t “push me around and make me do things.” Thousands of children leave home each year because they have no mechanism in the family to negotiate a better way of living with one another.

One of the arguments for raising obedient children is the assumption that your children will obey even when you’re not there to tell them what to do. For example, many parents will discourage their children from drinking, although they know that with any reasonable contact with the outside world, their children will encounter alcohol at some point in their lives. In all likelihood, you won’t be around when your child is offered an opportunity to get drunk with her friends. Will she not be tempted—especially if participating promises peer approval and acceptance? To whom will your child be obedient if you’re not there?

How your children handle independent decision-making depends on their motivation. There is a great difference, for example, between “I want to drink this beer to see what all this fuss is about!” and “I want to drink this beer so my friends will like me more.” Children are far less likely to make poor choices, continue in destructive behavior, or do things they honestly don’t want to do, if their self-image isn’t dependent entirely upon what other people think and expect. And when these children do make a poor choice, they will probably see the negative outcomes as the result of their choosing, and be far more likely to make more positive choices in the future.

Your kids can still cooperate with you and develop skill at making good, independent decisions at the same time. Regardless of your children’s ages, you are in the perfect position to build decision-making skill. Just remember that no skill develops in a vacuum, and if you want your kids to get good at making decisions when they get out in the world, then they need the opportunity to practice at home.

A commitment to building independence in your kids requires a willingness to trust your child’s ability to make choices, and learn from the outcomes. It requires a willingness to let go of the need for their dependence, of the need for your own control and often, of your...
own agenda or specific outcomes to which you are attached. It requires at least a bit of patience, as well as acceptance, because sometimes your children will make decisions you don’t like, and certainly decisions that deliver outcomes they don’t like! Watch the tendency to protect your kids from uncomfortable outcomes. These experiences can be the best teachers of all.

Training for independence means helping your children see themselves as decision-makers as a result of their personal experience. It means giving them some control in their lives as early and as often as possible. Be assured that allowing children to experience a sense of control in their lives does not mean allowing them to control the household! That wouldn’t be much fun for anyone! Kids also need a certain degree of structure in their lives, and decision-making is best learned within boundaries and limits. Usually, these limits will be set by the adult in the household (although kids can help negotiate limits that work for everyone). The purpose of this structure is to create a home in which everyone—kids and adults alike—believe that they count and have a chance to meet their needs. Empowering children within limits allows them to understand how their behavior affects others and themselves, and recognize that they are responsible for their own decisions and the consequences of their choices. In this loving environment, mistakes are simply corrected and viewed as opportunities to learn to do better next time.

Good decision-making is a skill. And like all learned skills, it is learned more thoroughly when it is experienced in small, incremental steps from a point of earliest readiness. Think of it like learning to swim, which many children learn before they walk or talk. They gain a real sense of control and accomplishment from this early mastery, which channels into self-esteem and confidence. We certainly don’t just throw babies into the water to sink or swim, but neither do we bar them from the pool until they are 18. Opportunities are provided as soon as they are ready to handle them, with encouragement and a watchful eye from parents or other adults. As they gain skill and confidence, we let them go a little bit farther on their own. Becoming a responsible decision-maker happens in much the same way, all within the context of an authority relationship in which the parents are still in charge, but don’t need to disempower kids to maintain their authority.

Start with small choices, but don’t overwhelm. One mother got so excited that she started offering her 4-year-old a number of choices regarding his lunch. Now starting with “peanut butter and jelly or bologna” isn’t bad. But once the child opted for the former, she offered “chunky or smooth,” plus choices about which type of bread, what kind of jelly, how to cut the sandwich, crusts on or off, and what color plate. By the time lunch was ready, the kid wasn’t hungry anymore and just wanted to go out and play.

Start with decisions your child can handle. For example, taking a bath may not be negotiable, yet your child can decide whether she wants her bath before or after she watches her favorite TV show, whether she wants to use the shower or tub, which two toys she wants to take into the tub with her or even which washcloth she wants to use.

As a quick plug for empowerment, many parents (and teachers, too) quickly discover that simply giving kids choices about things they have to do is a great way to generate their cooperation, even if it’s something they hate doing! The mother of a 2-year-old vegetable-hater found that her kid would eat just about anything as long as she had some input in determining which vegetable (from a list of two or three) would be served. By simply asking her child to help pick “whether corn or peas would go best with dinner tonight,” and securing additional commitment by asking her daughter to help open the bag, pour the vegetables into the pot and help stir, the child was not only less resistant to eating vegetables, but could, on occasion, be downright enthusiastic about them!

There are many age-appropriate choices available to parents that are easy to overlook in the course of a busy day. But it’ll be rare that you won’t have opportunities to offer choices—from “Which t-shirt do you want to wear today?” to “How do you plan to spend your allowance?”

The objection for many parents is about time. Sure, it’ll always seem easier to just plop your kid into a sweater than ask him to pick which one he wants to wear. (It can help if you limit the choices to two or three options, particularly if the child is overwhelmed.) And for sure there are kids who would just as soon outgrow a sweater as make a commitment. In this case, you can ask, “Do you want me to help you decide?” (This is also a choice.) But be prepared for them to want whichever option you don’t suggest. Make sure all choices are equal—otherwise, you’re setting your kid up to attempt to get your conditional approval by pleasing you with the “right” choice! If this is the case, then the most appropriate response to their desire for “the other option” is probably: “Great choice!” You can also set a time limit: “You’ve got till the big hand is on the six.” After that, you, the parent, get to decide. Try again the next day, or later that day, if possible. Keep trying until your kids gain the confidence they need to “pick something” and live with their choices.

With regard to homework, you can offer your children choices about when they’ll do the work (before dinner, after one hour, before your show comes on), or where (at Mom’s desk, in their room, at the kitchen table), for example. Given certain other contingencies (“As long as you get your work done...”), you might offer options, such as studying with a friend or listening to music to accommodate their particular learning styles and preferences.

Even with chores, which can begin early on and can be shared among everyone in the household, the more input your children have as to who does what, the more likely they are to cooperate. You might offer choices by presenting ten things that need to be done in each of their rooms by Friday, and ask them to pick the two they want to do tonight. Or you can present to your family a list of things that need to be done in the house, and pass the list around several times so that everyone has a chance to choose the chores they want to do. You can ask each individual to pick a room to dust, or promise your kids that if they get none of these ten chores done by Wednesday, you’ll do the one they leave off.

One parent found a great solution to a serious problem by offering a trade. She was quite disturbed by the constant conflict over a dirty bathroom, a chore she had assigned to her daughters who did anything they could think of to avoid this chore. She decided that a positive relationship was more important than who did the chore, although the fact that it had to get done was not negotiable.

She proposed: “I know you hate cleaning this bathroom, but it has to be cleaned. Which of my chores are you willing to do in exchange if I do this chore for you?” The mother reported that the girls had taken over the vacuuming, the laundry and washing her car every week. Not a bad deal! In addition, look at the model the parent provided. By her offer, she showed that it is possible to meet your needs without powering or hurting one another—that trading, compromising and negotiating are clear alternatives.

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This process requires enough cour-
age to allow the children to experience the outcomes (or consequences) of the choices they make. (In case it’s not obvi-
ous, this assumes that the outcomes will not pose a threat to the child’s safety.) Imagine, for example, that you have promised to read your child a story if he gets into pajamas and brushes his teeth by 7:30. If dawdling at bedtime is more need-fulfilling than hearing the story, he probably won’t be ready, even if you give him a 5-minute warning at 7:25. While he doesn’t get a story on this night, you can still tuck him in and kiss him goodnight. The absence of the posi-
tive consequence—not getting a story read to him—is what makes the point and gives you a great deal of authority in this situation (so long as you don’t cave in to his whining or pleading.) You can follow through on this arrangement without scolding, expressing your disap-
pointment or attacking the child’s judg-
ment or character. If he is disappointed
be easy, and most parents report that it sometimes gets worse before it gets better.
Parents who offer choices and see
good decision-making as one more skill they can teach and encourage in their children will eventually be rewarded with better decision-makers. Your kids may not do everything you want—did you?—but they will connect two of the most important variables in life: their choices and how those choices affect what they get from other people, situations, life and from themselves. This is the source of their empowerment, and their belief that they can influence their lives in positive, constructive ways—
even when you’re not there to tell them what to do.

Note: The original version of this article was co-authored with Lynn Collins, Ph.D.

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