**Choices and Power-We all Make ‘em and We All Need It**

**Angie Kendall**

I was speaking to a friend recently who asked me what to do about her 4 year old daughter’s behavior. She refused to follow directions, would throw a fit when she didn’t get her way and insisted on doing everything herself. In response I asked her to imagine the following scenario we talk about in one of the community education programs we offer:

*You wake up in the morning when a door flies open and someone runs through it yelling “wake up, gotta go” and leaving just as quickly as they arrived. You stretch, not sure what the plan is for the day. Are you going to work? Staying home? What should you wear? When will you be back home? You’re hungry for breakfast and as you head towards the pantry to find your favorite bread to make toast someone grabs your shoulders, redirects you to the table and hands you a banana. You look at it confused and start eating your breakfast. You yawn and close your eyes. It’s no wonder you are tired. Last night after a long day you ran around like a crazy person having no idea where you were going or what was coming next: little league, grocery store, a sandwich in the car, a bath, teeth brushing and off to bed before you even had a chance to unwind at night. Just as you are getting ready to finish your banana someone comes up behind you grabs your shirts and takes it off, next they are tugging at your socks and asking you to stand so you can change your pants. You hardly had time to realize you were almost naked at the breakfast table before you were dressed again and being shoved out the door.*

*You buckle your seat belt wondering where you are headed today. Usually you head to work first but sometimes you need to make other stops or appointments. You would ask the driver but they are on the phone planning their day. You look out your window and try to guess based on your surroundings. Soon, you arrive at your office. A look at the calendar tells you it’s Tuesday and therefore time for your team meeting. When you arrive you look around and realize there are three new people in the room-one of whom appears to be a new boss. Your stomach sinks. What does this mean? What changes will take place? What will happen next? Suddenly, your whole day is off and seemingly trivial items start to freak you out. When will the meeting be over so you can grab a snack and some coffee? You think you have a doctor’s appointment later in the week-will this new boss be as flexible as your old one? Your heart starts to race as you try to navigate what is thrown at you-after all; it’s only 8:00. How will you get through the rest of the day?*

How many times has your child been in a similar situation? How often are they thrown from activity to activity with no warning and only the expectation that they “roll with it.” Even though we may find ourselves harried, stressed and running a hundred different directions we are able to have some control as an adult. We know where we have to go next, we can stop if we have to go to the bathroom, we have the power to change our plans. Our children don’t and they are often innocent bystanders in the great rat race to the next thing.

Not only do we often leave children completely powerless as they have no control over their environment or activities but we do this to them right when they are yearning to learn what it means to be self-sufficient and to have power. It’s an incredibly important developmental time as children learn to do things on their own, are able to make choices and suddenly find themselves with the ability to take control. It’s a time in development that can be frustrating to parents already but when we take away all stability and comfort it makes children want to exercise their power even more.

It is important that you recognize the child’s need and desire to control some part of the day. Respect that human need to feel safe and comfortable in their environment by preparing the child for what will happen. Let him or her know what to expect before it happens. Whether it’s letting a child know they need to get dressed and you plan to help them or telling them that you will be leaving in 5 minutes for school. You will find yourself with a child who is much more comfortable and trusting in their environment instead of one who is always on edge and not sure what is coming next.

The next piece, and a very important one at that, is to recognize every person’s need for power and control. When a parent tells me about how their child is always wanting to do things their way or ignoring requests or flat out refusing to do anything I say “it sounds like they are exercising their power-I’d give it to them.” This is always followed by someone rolling their eyes at me or staring at me in shock-simply give in? No, that’s not what I am saying. I am saying children need and deserve power and they will find a way to get it whether you like it or not. So, give it to them on your terms.

Decide what you need from them. Maybe brushing their teeth, cleaning their toys, going to bed, whatever it is. That is your goal. Give the child power-but make sure it meets your goal. How do you do this? “Would you like to brush your teeth before or after you use mouthwash?” “Would you like to eat your green beans with your right hand or left hand?” “Would you like to hop to the bathroom or skip?” Suddenly, the child gets choices and has power-and you still meet your goal! What if the child doesn’t choose one of those? Easy, you choose for him. “I see you don’t want to choose today. I will help you, I choose for you to brush your teeth first.” If they refuse, gently guide them through the activity.

Giving choices works throughout life. In fact, choices mean a lot less yelling when a child gets older. “Your curfew is 10:00. If you are home later than 10 you will not be able to go out tomorrow.” “If your homework is done you can play video games after dinner. If it isn’t then no games tonight.” The responsibility is on the child. If they come home late there is no argument, they already knew what would happen if they chose to ignore their curfew. If homework isn’t done then there is no need to argue, simply put up the gaming system. They knew what would happen and made their choices accordingly. Not only are you saving yourself stress and likely an argument you are teaching the child what it means to be an adult! Every one of us makes choices-and we must live with them. My choice? Give children power and respect!

For information about the Child Abuse Council’s prevention, education and treatment programs you can visit us as www.childabuseqc.org, or call (309) 786-1466, or contact Angie at Angiek@childabuseqc.org