

Pseudochoice

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By Alfie Kohn

Some parents and teachers talk about “choice” not in the context of allowing kids to have more say but rather as a way of blaming them for deliberately deciding to do something bad. A sentence such as “You chose to break the rule” amounts to using this word almost like a bludgeon against children. It’s also a way of trying to justify a punitive response, so it shouldn’t be surprising to learn that people who talk this way are indeed more likely to use punishment and other power-based interventions (Scott-Little and Holloway, 1992).

Adults who blithely insist that children choose to misbehave are rather like politicians who declare that people have only themselves to blame for being poor. In both cases, potentially relevant factors other than personal responsibility are ignored. A young child in particular may not have the fully developed capacity for rational decision-making or impulse control that is implicit in suggesting he made a choice. (Adults who take those limits into account are likely to try to help the child develop the relevant skills, rather than to punish and blame.) A second similarity between the attribution of choice by parents (or teachers) and politicians is that in both cases it’s the very people claiming this who tend to benefit from such thinking. They have no need to reconsider their own decisions and demands. Adults, for example, can simply tell themselves that their children “chose” whatever happened.

Sometimes it's the idea of choice that's misused rather than just the word. We find this when parents and teachers pretend to let the child decide while actually keeping all the real decision-making authority to themselves. There are three common forms of "pseudochoice," all of which, sadly, can be found in discipline and classroom-management books as examples of what we're supposed to do.

In the first version, kids are asked a loaded question such as "Do you want to do your [chore or assignment] now, or would you rather do it (while your favorite TV program is on)(during recess)?" The problem here isn't just that the options have been reduced to two. It's that no real choice is being offered at all. Obviously the child doesn't want to miss her program or recess. The parent is really saying "Do what I tell you or you'll be punished." The language of choice is used to disguise what is basically just a threat.

The second kind of pseudochoice is different only in that the deception occurs *after* a child does something regarded as inappropriate. The adult announces that a punishment will be imposed, but describes it as something the child asked for – as in, "You've *chosen* a time-out." This phrase appeals to some people because it seems to relieve them of any responsibility for what they're about to do, but it's fundamentally dishonest and manipulative. To the injury of punishment is added the insult of a kind of mind game whereby reality is redefined and children are told, in effect, that they wanted to be made to suffer. "You've chosen a time-out" is a lie; a truthful parent or teacher would have to say, "I've chosen to isolate you."

A slightly different version of this ploy consists of saying something like "Don't make me give you a consequence!" – in effect, pretending that the child is responsible for "making" the adult punish her. It's interesting to observe how many people who piously declare that children must take responsibility for their own behavior – sometimes even before they're really old enough to do so – end up twisting reality so as to escape responsibility for *their* behavior. ("Don't look at me! The kid forced me to do bad things to her!")

The last version of pseudochoice occurs when parents or teachers go through the motions of letting the child choose but make it clear how the results must come out. Some options are acceptable and others are not, and the child is expected to figure out what the adult wants him to do – that is, if he ever wants to have the chance to “choose” again. (“I guess you’re not mature enough to be allowed to decide these things for yourself” means “You didn’t pick what I wanted you to.”) Better just to tell a child “I’m going to pick for you,” which at least is honest, than to go through this charade.

This essay appeared in slightly different forms in *Unconditional Parenting* (chapter 9) and *Beyond Discipline* (chapter 4).

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