Making Choices—
Improving Behavior—
Engaging in Learning

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Do you have students who display inappropriate types of behavior, or who seem depressed, or who lack friends? Perhaps these are students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD; see box), and maybe the students present challenges that you find difficult to deal with and that interfere with their educational progress.

This article highlights one strategy, providing opportunities to make choices, that is effective in increasing appropriate behaviors for students with EBD (Munk & Repp, 1994), most notably when used by classroom teachers during ongoing classroom routines (Jolivette, Wehby, Canale, & Massey, 2001b; see also the box on page 28, “What Does the Literature Say?” for a link between the research literature on choice and related behavioral characteristics of students with EBD.)

We present a hypothetical case example to show how a teacher might incorporate choice-making opportunities for a student with EBD who is failing math in school. In the course of this article, we suggest practical strategies that both special and general education teachers may use in their academic curricula to encourage students to make appropriate choices. These opportunities may have benefits that long outlast the particular task or situation, to enhance relationships within the classroom, engage students in learning, and promote a positive classroom environment.

Opportunities to Make Choices
Choice-making opportunities provide students the opportunity to make decisions that may affect their daily routines (e.g., choice of academic task). For example, a student may choose:

- From a list of explorers which explorer to write a report on.
- To begin another game with a different peer during free time.
- To use colored markers while illustrating a picture as part of a book report.
- The type of medium (poster, costume, movie) to use for a presentation on a country in social studies.

These varied choice-making opportunities occur frequently in most classrooms. They may seem trivial at first glance, but such choices can have significant implications for the type and level of student participation (Jolivette, Stichter, Sibilsky, Scott, & Ridgely, 2001a).

Several recent classroom investigations into the use of “choice” for students with EBD have shown that this strategy is effective in increasing (or decreasing) specific behaviors in school (Cosden, Gannon, & Haring, 1995; Dunlap et al., 1994; Jolivette et al., 2001b). These results suggest that providing students with EBD the opportunity to make choices during academic situations can promote increased levels of functional and prosocial student behavior. Here are some findings:

- Cosden et al. (1995) found that student accuracy and completion of academic tasks increased when the students were provided with opportunities to choose the task or reinforcer.
- Dunlap et al. (1994) found that the levels of task engagement increased while levels of disruptive behavior decreased when students were provid-

What Are Characteristics of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders?

Students with EBD often have these characteristics:

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, 1997, CFR 300.7 (a) 9).

In addition, students with EBD may display these characteristics during academic situations when teacher demands are consistently high and if they have a history of school failure (e.g., performing below grade level).
ed with opportunities to choose the academic task to complete.

- Jolivette et al. (2001b) found that student task engagement increased, as did the number and accuracy of attempted problems, when students were provided with opportunities to choose the order in which to complete three tasks (same concept but variable formats).

**Case Study: Isaac**

Isaac is a 7-year-old first-grader with EBD who attends a combined first/second-grade special education class for students with EBD. He had a full-scale IQ of 79 (verbal = 85 and performance = 74), according to the WISC-III. Isaac’s teacher reports that he performs below grade level in mathematics and that he is noncompliant and off task during independent math seatwork activities.

Isaac performs at the grade equivalence of beginning kindergarten (K.0) on the Woodcock-Johnson Calculation, Applied Problems, and General Math subtests (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989). In addition, Isaac is rated in the clinical range for the areas of hyperactivity, aggression, conduct problems, and somatization on the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC).

Isaac commonly displays the following behaviors during 15-minute regularly scheduled independent math activities:

- Ripping up or throwing the math worksheet to the floor when prompted to begin to work.
- Verbally disrupting the peer next to him.
- Making black pencil marks over the surface of the worksheet instead of solving the problems.
- Asking a peer for assistance on the first few problems.
- Asking the teacher for access to various manipulative items for use with the worksheet and if given a negative verbal response, verbally threatening the teacher.
- Walking around the classroom when the expectation was for him to be at his desk.
- Questioning the teacher as to what he was going to do after math.

The teacher also reports that because of Isaac’s inappropriate behaviors during math, Isaac was experiencing academic failure in math and was not meeting his individualized education program (IEP) math objectives.

To address Isaac’s inappropriate behavior, the teacher removed privileges (e.g., free time), moved Isaac’s desk away from the other desk pods, and retaught basic math skills on a one-to-one basis during his free time. The teacher states, however, that Isaac’s inappropriate behaviors have only escalated; and he continues to make little progress in math.

**Strategies for Infusing Opportunities to Make Choices into Math**

Given Isaac’s behavior and lack of success in math, we suggest providing Isaac with opportunities to make choices during his regularly scheduled, independent math periods to increase his appropriate social and academic behaviors. Because the punitive consequences (loss of privileges and isolation) were ineffective, perhaps the teacher can try another approach: providing opportunities to make choices. This may be a more proactive plan in addressing Isaac’s inappropriate behaviors and math failure, and perhaps it will encourage Isaac to display appropriate behavior and achieve success during math activities and tasks.

For this particular student, the focus for choice-making opportunities will be on academic activities related to math instruction and related IEP objectives. There are several ways to implement these opportunities into the existing curricula for Isaac, either before or during tasks, to provide environmental predictability and a sense of control for him. Note that the provision of choice does not alter the curricular objective for Isaac: accurately completing math worksheets.

**Choices Before the Task Demand**

To provide Isaac with predictability in his independent math seatwork period, Isaac’s teacher may provide him with the opportunity to decide when he will begin his math worksheet. For example, many students are expected to perform a variety of tasks in the classroom that can be completed throughout the day. Such tasks may include watering the plants, returning library books, and picking up and returning lunch tickets. In Isaac’s case, he was expected to straighten the workbook shelf and sharpen the pencils each day. His teacher could then state those two tasks along with the math task demand and provide Isaac with the choice of when to start his math: before he completes those two tasks or after completion of the two tasks. The choice of when to begin his worksheet may provide Isaac with a sense of predictability and a sense of control over his math routine and thus decrease his displays of inappropriate behaviors.

If Isaac were observed to request information regarding what events were scheduled for him after completing his math worksheets, it may indicate that the teacher was not following a consistent classroom routine or that Isaac’s daily schedule was more complicated than he could effectively follow on his own. Providing Isaac with this information before or while giving him his
task demand may influence his behavior based on whether the event is preferred (e.g., free time) or nonpreferred (e.g., spelling test).

To promote appropriate behavior, his teacher may provide an opportunity for Isaac to choose the event that will occur immediately following completion of his math task, even if it is just for a few minutes, before another regularly scheduled class activity. For example, Isaac may select between a computer-simulated math game, a math card game with a peer, or a math board game. Thus, Isaac is rewarded for task completion with a selected event.

If the observation data suggested that Isaac’s inappropriate behavior (e.g., out of seat behavior, disruption) increased because of his frustration with the math task, it may be helpful for his teacher to provide Isaac with the choice of terminating the task for brief periods of time (e.g., 30 seconds) so as to provide him with a “cooling off” period. Teaching Isaac to better regulate his own behavior within the context of a choice-making opportunity provides a functional and lifelong skill that most people could use.

As the task is presented to Isaac, his teacher may remind Isaac that he has the option to take “mini-breaks” while working on the worksheet. For example, his teacher may ask Isaac how many problems he will attempt before choosing to take a break. Isaac may select three problems. The teacher then would remind Isaac: “After you work out three problems, you may choose to take a 30-second break before starting on your worksheet again.” These mini-breaks are controlled by Isaac and provide him with the ability to self-regulate his behavior while still working on the task and may decrease his subsequent inappropriate behaviors.

The teacher can also allow Isaac to select items he feels he will need to complete his math task successfully. For example, the teacher may present Isaac with the math task and prompt him to prepare his work area. In this case, the teacher may ask him what type of writing utensil (e.g., pencil, pen, colored pencil), what kind of eraser (e.g., stuck on the pencil, hand-held eraser), and what color of scrap paper for his work (e.g., white, yellow, blue) he will need to complete his math task. By preparing his work area through choice-making opportunities, the teacher is minimizing Isaac’s out-of-seat behavior—his selected supplies are at hand.

**Choices During the Task Demand**

To provide Isaac with predictability and consistency, as well as to give him perceived control during the task, his teacher may give him a variety of choice-making opportunities. For example, if Isaac is expected to complete more than one worksheet during the independent math period, his teacher may allow him to select the order in which to complete the worksheets. After presenting Isaac with all the worksheets he needs to complete, his teacher may ask him which worksheet he wants to complete first, second, and so on. Then the teacher (or Isaac) can write the numbers 1 and 2 on top of the worksheets to indicate his order preference.

To reinforce the order Isaac has chosen, the teacher may give Isaac one worksheet at a time and, on completion, give him the second or third worksheet while saying, “Good job! You are ready for the worksheet you chose to complete second.”

Isaac may also have been observed to seek out assistance from his peers during independent math periods, thus affecting his peers’ ability to complete their math tasks. No matter if Isaac is displaying these behaviors as a means to gain peer attention or to escape the math task—his teacher can manipulate the environment so that Isaac is appropriately interacting with his peers during this time. For instance, when the task is given to Isaac, he may be permitted to select a peer with whom to work on the task. Isaac may complete the even-numbered problems while his peer completes the odd-numbered problems, and then each can “check” the answers of the other. In this case, the task demand has not been changed; Isaac still needs to complete all the math problems (solving and checking). Or Isaac may be permitted to select the communication mode with which to gain teacher attention (e.g., assistance). When the teacher gives Isaac a math task to work on at his desk, the teacher may prompt Isaac to select either raising his hand, holding up a red note card (provided by the teacher), or making a thumbs-up gesture to solicit assistance with the task. Such a choice provides Isaac with a means to appropriately gain teacher attention without disrupting his peers or leaving his seat.

In addition, Isaac may have been observed to wander around the room during seatwork periods, disrupting his peers who remain in their seats. While presenting Isaac with his math task, his teacher may provide him with an opportunity to select where in the room he wants to complete his math worksheet(s). In many classrooms, empty desks or portions of large tables may be available as choices. If Isaac has a history of displaying increased levels of inappropriate behaviors when in close proximity to certain peers, then empty desks in that area would not be part of his choice. In that case, the teacher may limit the possible areas in the room that Isaac can select from.

When multiple math worksheets are not part of the task, nor are other choices involving peer partners or different locations feasible, Isaac’s teacher may permit him to choose the methods in which he will complete the task. For example, Isaac could start at the bottom
of the page and work to the top of the page, work from right to left, or randomly select the order of the problems from the worksheet. The teacher may also remind Isaac to be careful not to skip problems. Again, the task does not change, but how Isaac can complete the task has been manipulated.

In addition, Isaac may have occasionally asked his teacher for access to math manipulatives to use while he worked on his task. When appropriate, Isaac’s teacher may provide him with opportunities to select the type of manipulatives (materials) he wants to use to complete the task. For example, he may select base-ten blocks, blocks, or beans. Or he may select a one-hundred chart, counting strip, or counting bracelet.

**Benefits of Infusing Choice-Making Opportunities into the Classroom**

Initial research in classrooms on the use of choice-making opportunities for students with EBD indicates that providing opportunities to make choices during ongoing academic activities is an effective, efficient classroom strategy (Cosden et al., 1995; Dunlap et al., 1994; Jolivette et al., 2001b). The following benefits may result:

- **Providing a student with EBD an opportunity to choose among already existing materials** may be a cost-effective method to minimize some of the inappropriate behaviors typically displayed by these students during academic situations. Teachers can manipulate existing environmental conditions, materials, and natural consequences without using scarce time and money to create “new” instructional materials (e.g., where to sit in the room to complete a task, order of completion for existing tasks, methods to use to complete a given task).

- **Providing choices may promote more positive relations among all students, better teacher-student interactions, and a more focused classroom environment** (Shores et al., 1993). Providing opportunities to make choices can help teachers assign tasks in a more positive way, while providing predictability for the student in the current task situation.

For example, when a student selects to raise his or her hand to communicate “I need help,” then the teacher reinforces the student’s choice and comes over and offers assistance. And when the student completes the task with accuracy, the teacher provides the student a choice of what to do next (e.g., put a puzzle together, work on any homework assignments, check out a book from the library).

- **By providing the student with opportunities to make choices, the teacher is relinquishing some of the decision-making power in the classroom.** Being able to make choices during academic tasks may provide students with skills needed in other academically focused programs.

  For example, a small group of students may have the task of creating a bulletin board as part of their report on the human body. Instead of the teacher telling the students that they will create a bulletin board on the digestive system and will highlight it with an interactive component, the teacher may allow the group to select the specific content for the bulletin board but provide parameters for their choice. These parameters may include (a) select one of the following body systems—nervous, digestive, circulatory; (b) provide a detailed visual with supporting information on the selected system; (c) incorporate an interactive activity; and (d) double check all information for accuracy and organization. Thus, the teacher has provided the small group with multiple opportunities to make choices while completing an academic task. This example would be appropriate for older students, but can be adapted for younger students like Isaac.

- **The provision of choice-making opportunities may simultaneously affect social and task-related behaviors of students with EBD.** Students with EBD seek opportunities to influence (control) their classroom environments; unfortunately they may also do so by displaying inappropriate behaviors. Guess, Benson, and Siegel-Causey (1985) suggested that choice-making opportunities not only provide a student with the power to manipulate variables but the ability to exert control over environmental events through appropriate means. For students with EBD, this is significant given their use of inappropriate behavior as a means to create more preferred behavior. By adding the predictability to the tasks, as well as providing the student with “power” to manipulate those tasks through choices, the teacher may encourage students to display higher rates of appropriate social behavior while making academic improvement.

In Isaac’s case, he was provided with opportunities to make choices within the context of his math tasks, which provided predictability in the math routine and the ability to manipulate events within it.

**Implications for Practice**

When considering opportunities to infuse increased choice-making within the curriculum, consider the following issues:

1. Start small and think “manageable” in terms of successive steps. Instead of offering students with EBD opportunities to make choices throughout the entire school day, begin with one or two curricular areas or periods of time. A convenient place to start is during student free time or when students are finishing tasks on a varied schedule. For example, during free time, provide a student with EBD with three options from the classroom environment, such as access to the computer, a book from the
What Are Choice-Making Opportunities? Providing students with EBD opportunities to make choices means that the student is provided with two or more options, is allowed to independently select an option, and is provided with the selected option. For example, before distributing a test, the teacher states that each student will complete 25 multiple-choice questions but may choose to either write two essay responses or five short-answer responses as the second part of the test. Each student is called to the teacher’s desk to make a selection and is then provided with the selection and told to sit at his or her desk and complete the test. Once all students are at their desks, the teacher says, “When you finish the test, turn it in, take an enrichment folder, and follow the directions inside.” This example highlights the provision of choice-making opportunities within naturally occurring classroom events and the connection between choice and environmental predictability.

What Is Predictability? Predictability may be defined as a person’s ability to accurately judge and interpret what environmental events precede or follow other specific environmental events. That is, the students are provided with an opportunity to make a choice, the choice option is honored, and the events after the test are known. Positive effects of choice-making opportunities may be due, in part, to this predictability once a choice is made (Brown, Belz, Corsi, & Wenig, 1993).

The ability to predict environmental relationships through choice-making opportunities provides the student with an opportunity to act in a manner that helps assure the occurrence of expected environmental events, such as positive interactions with others, cessation of tasks, or reinforcement for a behavior. In the test-taking example with choices, the students knew what they were expected to do (make a choice and complete the test) and what event was going to occur after the test (work on tasks in enrichment folder). It is common, however, for students with EBD to have difficulty regulating their behaviors when environmental events are perceived to be unpredictable.

In the test-taking example, if the student selected the five short-answer responses but the teacher gave him or her the two essay questions instead, that would create unpredictability. In the student’s search for a known or predictable environmental event, the student may consequently display high rates of inappropriate behaviors because he or she knows what the consequences of these behaviors will be. Although potentially undesirable, the consequences are, nevertheless, predictable. For example, a student may act out to gain teacher attention during independent seatwork if teacher attention does not occur when the student displays appropriate behavior and is consistently provided for inappropriate behavior during seatwork times. A student with EBD, however, with the skill to predict potential consequences of his or her own behavior, may display higher rates of appropriate behavior to help ensure the desired teacher attention.

The need for predictability may influence students’ behavior even when the ability to exert control over the environment is unavailable (Gunter, Shores, Jack, Denny, & DePaeppe, 1994). Given this need for predictability, it is important to assess and modify environments proactively to assist students in making positive choices that will result in both predictable and desirable outcomes (Brown et al., 1993).

How Are Predictability and Inappropriate Behavior Linked? Current research in classrooms for students with behavior problems suggests that, unfortunately, predictability most often comes as the result of inappropriate behavior. For example, Van Acker, Grant, and Henry (1996) investigated the interactions that occurred between teachers and students at risk for EBD by conducting a study of 25 teachers and 206 students with mild levels of behavioral problems or higher levels of behavioral problems. These researchers found that most predictable teacher and student interaction patterns were that of teacher demand (academic or social)-to-student noncompliance behavior-to-teacher reprimand-to-student noncompliance behavior. When students engaged in appropriate behavior, however, there was less consistency in teacher responses to the student. Therefore, not surprisingly, if predictability in interactions were important, students might engage in inappropriate behavior to obtain a predictable response from the teacher.

The simultaneous effects of choice-making opportunities on both academic and social behaviors is an area that has been underexplored (Powell & Nelson, 1997) and will be an important area for future research and application of choice in the classroom for students with EBD.

How Do We Break the Cycle of Negative Responses? Providing opportunities for students with EBD to make choices related to academic tasks may disrupt the negative cycle of teacher-student interactions described by Van Acker et al. (1996), as well as provide consistency and predictability to academic contexts. For students with EBD, predictability and control may be critical concepts and skills that are necessary and required for appropriately interpreting and coping with the environment, as well as practicing new prosocial skills. When students with EBD perceive their environments to be less threatening and perceive themselves as able to predict and control events, they may increase appropriate kinds of behavior.

For example, in the test-taking scenario with choices, the test became more predictable through teacher direction and known events after completion of the test, and the students were able to control the type of written responses required—short answer or essay. Thus, the use of choice-making opportunities can provide the environmental predictability needed to minimize the characteristically inappropriate behaviors exhibited by students with EBD during task situations, while strengthening appropriate responses and increased levels of engagement.
teacher’s bookshelf, or a puzzle with which to play. Once the student demonstrates the ability to make choices, combine choice-making opportunities. For instance, provide the student with choice options and, once an option is selected, allow the student a choice of where in the room to use the free-time option.

2. Begin infusing opportunities to make choices within the curricular area in which the student will gain the most. With Isaac, we suggested starting in math because he was experiencing high rates of both academic and social difficulties in that area, contributing to his school failure. When selecting the specific area, review existing student data (e.g., anecdotal records, grade summaries) to guide area selection.

3. View opportunities to make choices along a continuum. For example, the choices provided to Isaac were basic and concrete. That is, those choices were not significant to decisions he will need to make in the future (e.g., such as what job to train for) but still provided practice in choice-making critical to his proficiency and success in making more important choices.

4. Be consistent in both the presentation and follow-through with choice-making opportunities. For example, offer the same number of choice-making opportunities for the targeted area; and when a student makes a choice, reinforce the selection by providing him or her with the selected item. By considering these four issues before infusing opportunities to make choices into the curricula for students with EBD, you may provide the appropriate environmental context for both student and teacher success.

**Final Thoughts**

Overall, research on classroom environments for students with EBD has suggested that punishing students (e.g., withholding rewards, denying choices) for inappropriate behavior only promotes negative and inconsistent interactions between teachers and students (Steinberg & Knitzer, 1992; Van Acker et al., 1996). These findings support the classroom components cited by Reitz (1994) as necessary for students with EBD to experience school success (e.g., high rates of social reinforcement and student academic involvement and achievement).

The provision of choice-making opportunities for students with EBD is a viable curricular modification that links student involvement with student decision making for social and academic success (Mathur, Nelson, & Rutherford, 1998).

**References**


