



Engaging Cooperation through Choice and Preference

Adapted August 2017 by Victoria McMullen, Laura O'Rourke, & Meme Hieneman for Home & Community PBS from Engaging Cooperation through Choice and Participation by Shelley Clarke & Meme Hieneman (Parenting Special Needs Magazine, 2011, Jan/Feb, 44-45).

Sometimes, the people we support are happy and agreeable until we ask them to do something they don't want to do. When we tell a person it's time to get ready, pick up their belongings, help with household chores, or complete some other undesirable task, we may see a totally different side of them. As parents of adult children or support staff, it is difficult to see a person transform from easy-going to difficult just because we request something of them. Luckily, resistance to demands is not a foregone conclusion. This article will provide a set of tips, organized into a planning guide, to help a person succeed at the things they would simply rather not do. First, the tips...

Define behavior.

It is important to make sure that expectations are perfectly clear to a person. Consider in advance exactly what is required and how or how well it needs to be accomplished. Break long or complex tasks down into manageable steps.

Arrange environment.

How surroundings are arranged can promote people's success in daily tasks. Organize space and materials so that all necessary supplies are on hand and distractions are removed. Help the person schedule tasks at consistent times so they become a predictable part of routines.

Present expectations.

The way we present expectations influences how people respond. Encourage the person to complete (or avoid starting) enjoyable activities before asking

people to begin activities they may not want to perform.

Provide choice.

Offer choices whenever possible, such as when tasks will be performed, what materials will be used, the order of task completion and how exactly the tasks will be accomplished and what activity will follow. A good guideline to follow is to offer at least one kind of choice during each activity.

Encourage success.

We should not assume that people know how to complete tasks. When in doubt, don't just tell - teach. Teach people to perform the skills by talking through expectations or showing them the actions necessary to finish. When needed, use visual cues, gestures, or physical assistance to guide them to complete complicated tasks.

Reward progress.

Everyone is more cooperative when participation in non-preferred tasks is followed by something they enjoy. Provide praise when people are actively working and arrange rewards by following tasks with preferred activities. Offering your assistance, as well as interspersing pleasant activities between tasks, can serve as rewards for good progress. Pairing preferred activities such as a person's favorite music with the task can also be reinforcing.

Correct errors.

Providing feedback and holding people accountable are essential to learning skills. Point out mistakes and ask people to redo aspects of tasks that are done incorrectly. Don't let people "off the hook" for

complaining or other inappropriate behavior. If you ignore deliberate errors or allow problem behavior to delay or avoid completing tasks, the person may be more inclined to resist or behave inappropriately the next time you ask him or her to do something.

Advance planning goes a long way to helping people succeed at undesirable tasks. Below we provide examples of tasks parents of adult children or support staff commonly require of people, organized around the headers above.

Brushing Teeth

Define Task: Brush each area of mouth (front, back, top, bottom, side, side) using up/down and side-to-side strokes, continuing for two minutes. Fill cup, rinse mouth, and spit.

Arrange Environment: Have toothbrush and toothpaste, and cup on counter. Brush after breakfast and again as part of bedtime routine (e.g., before preferred activities). Provide a visual breakdown of the task if appropriate.

Present Expectations: Turn all electronics off before request is made. Remind of steps. Use a brush with a light that goes off after 2 minutes or create a timer with an audio clip of the person's favorite music.

Provide Choice: Offer a choice of two different toothpastes.

Encourage Success: Model brushing your own teeth, talking through the steps as the person follows along. Post pictures of all areas to be brushed on the bathroom mirror and point to sections of the mouth to remind the person where to brush.

Reward Progress: Praise the person while he is brushing. Schedule favorite activities (e.g., games, reading magazines, watching a video) following tooth brushing.

Correct Errors: Stop praise and redirect to brushing when the person hesitates for longer than 5 seconds. If the person resists, or refuses, have them reset the timer. Ignore complaints. Do not allow the person to leave or play until done.

Clearing Table

Define Task: Remove all items from the place mat when done eating. Scrape food into trash. Place plate, utensils, and glass in sink.

Arrange Environment: Encourage the person to keep all items on his or her mat. Have the trash can open and space available in sink.

Present Expectations: Remind the person not to leave the dinner table or start other activities until table is cleared. Provide a visual breakdown of the task if appropriate.

Provide Choice: Allow the person to clear the items in any order. Give a choice of wearing dishwashing gloves or not or what station to tune the radio to while clearing the table.

Encourage Success: Show and explain the person how to clear table, hold plate and cup level, and make sure all food is removed when scraping. Have the person keep returning to the table until the place mat is empty.

Reward Progress: Praise each step of the task (removing each item, holding steady, scraping food, checking table). Offer help with scraping if person is trying, but having difficulty. Offer a small dessert after place is cleared.

Correct Errors: Stop the person if he or she misses a step or tries to leave without the place mat cleared. Withhold dessert until the place is cleared or if the person yells or slams any of the items.

This planning guide can be used for any activity that may be required. The tips and examples demonstrate how to build expectations into daily routines and promote people's successful completion of undesirable tasks. In addition to these tips, it is important to ensure that demands are appropriate. If tasks are too hard, uncomfortable, or really unpleasant you may want to rethink whether requiring the task is reasonable. Taking each of the aspects into considerations and using this planning guide will promote success for you and the people you support.