

Do your children have too many choices?

It is considered good parenting to offer children options to choose from to help them learn good decision-making, afford them a sense of personal power, and encourage cooperation. “Would you like your milk in a glass or a cup?” “Do you want to wear your blue shirt or your red one?” “Will your homework be done before or after dinner?” Often choices motivate children to make a decision about something they don’t want to do. But giving too many choices can backfire. We all know that asking a toddler to choose between more than two things often leads to a meltdown.

I recently read an article in *Scientific American* called “The Tyranny of Choice” by Barry Schwartz, who contends, “although some choice is undoubtedly better than none, more is not always better than less.” He cites studies claiming that the increased number of choices we have, giving us more freedom to do what we want, actually brings with it more unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and even depression. It made me think about our children and the number of choices they have today – both ones we give them and ones inherent in today’s culture – and the increase in apathy, resistance to cooperation, diagnoses of disorders, and epidemic proportions of depression and obesity. I will not argue that all of this is a direct result of too many choices, but Schwartz’ theory that multiple choice leads to more dissatisfaction rather than more happiness gives one pause.

He adds that the fallout from too many choices is the “adaptation” we make. The more choices we have, the quicker we get accustomed to having them and the quicker we feel deprived if we don’t have them. Yet, the more we have to choose from, the more we miss out on. If I choose A, I lose B. What about C and D or even E? Would one of them have been a better choice? Would we be better off and thus happier if we didn’t have so many choices?

Parents want the best for their children. The temptation is to pour on more rather than ask them to be satisfied with less. Parents wanting their children to get ahead of the game push for extra learning, extra activities, extra everything. Can too many choices interfere with the creativity and imagination required by having to “make do?”

We have learned that presenting babies and young children with all kinds of activities to stimulate brain function does not help them get ahead. They are much better off left to their own developmental devices nurtured in an environment of loving, caring interpersonal relations. Hopefully we will learn sooner rather than later that introducing academics and homework to kindergarteners is a huge mistake. We cannot improve on the learning that children get from play. Long ago, child development experts determined that the age of productivity, when children are ready to learn and produce academically, is about seven. Some things we can't improve on.

Today's children have endless choices – think of what the internet alone brings right to their homes and classrooms. Creative play out in the woods seems to be relegated to the “old days” along with corncob dolls. After-school activities are as valued as a school's course offerings. Colleges look for large numbers of them. Teens are bombarded and often overwhelmed by all they have to do to become a full-fledged adult in our society. Do we ask too much of them? Do they have too many choices of paths to follow? We know that way too many choose escape into drugs, alcohol, and risk taking behavior to avoid school and parental expectations. What is our part in all of that? Could it be that our expectations are too high, not high enough, unrealistic or misguided for who they are and what they are capable of sorting out at this stage of life?

With summer upon us, think about how your child will be spending time over the next 8-10 weeks. Does she have the opportunity to just chill? Can he simply hang out? I am *not* an advocate of year-round school for the sole reason that children need down time for longer than two weeks. They need the

opportunity to come up with their own ideas of play and fun without the overbearing direction of adults. They lose their amazing capacity for imagining, creating their own language and rules of play, and problem solving when they are always told what to do and when to do it. Remember when summers seemed endless? (Am I showing my age?) I wonder if that was because we had fewer choices and less to do? I don't think children need more to choose from; they need to relearn how to find the wonder and acceptance of what is in front of them. Couldn't we all do with a little more of that?