

# Freedom and Responsibility: How Choices and Limits Help Children Develop Character

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Some of the most misunderstood concepts in the Montessori approach are “freedom and responsibility” and the “development of the will.”

A delicate balance of freedom and responsibility leads to the development of the will. The three interact in an ascending spiral that gives children gradual, increasing success to make decisions and direct their own lives. This is the ultimate goal of an education for life, making these some of the very most important aspects of a young child’s life, at school and at home. In order to understand this process of developing the will, think of freedom as being choices, and responsibility as being limits. This way, freedom and responsibility are results--rather than starting points--in a child’s development. Choices and limits lead a child to freedom and responsibility.

## Why Develop the Will?

At first, our youngest children are ruled by their impulses. They may kick, pinch, or grab, from impulses which they haven’t learned to control yet. By giving choices, we help a child develop his own will so that he can choose, think independently, and become truly free. The control then comes from *inside* the child, not from the outside; this is how a child is empowered by his developing will. Gradually, through repeated experiences of making choices with limits, young children become more settled, less impulsive, more self-disciplined, ready to join others, comfortable, and truly free.

Having experiences helps a child make new decisions. For instance, if a child is offered a choice between a banana and an apple but has never tasted an apple, he might choose one or the other impulsively, not sure which he wants. Knowledge comes through experience, so once he has tasted an apple and decides he does not like it, he can make a more informed choice the next time. His will comes into play when the options are posed to him another day: “I know I really like bananas better than apples because I have tasted both,” and, “I am going to choose the banana now.”

This new knowledge enables a child to make the choice. Making choices inspires his interest in what is happening. Repeating this cycle (choice-knowledge-interest-next choice...) enables a child to develop his will, strengthening his ability to make his own decisions and forming his character. “The will” is the

ability to pause and choose, based on thought. When the will is more developed, it means a child has this strength to pause and decide, taking the choices and limits of his environment into account.

## Why Give Choice?

To lead to this success, we need an environment where young children can make choices and be active. An adult can help a young child channel his energy into positive actions by offering choices of activities that he can become deeply engaged in.

At home, we want to give our young children two options whenever possible. (Two choices provide a needed limit.) The choice between two things allows our children to practice-- again and again--will over impulse. Because children under age three are deeply in the process of developing their wills, their behavior can be "difficult" if we do not recognize that this is what is happening. We can also frustrate the process by giving too many choices or letting a child have anything and everything. Naptimes, bedtimes, meals, clothes, toys--these all can be permissively confusing if there is no structure or limits. On the flip side, we can frustrate the child's process by never offering clear choices between two available options. The two available options give our one- and two-year-olds opportunities to do just what they need to do: develop their wills through simple choices, again and again.

Please note, we are not talking about the first year of life, because when children are about 15 to 18 months old is when giving them choices between two things becomes so important; this is when the development of the will is a focus in their development. This focus can inspire behavior that has earned the unfortunate expression "the terrible twos." When we realize that two-year-olds' frustrated behavior comes from an overpowering desire to make one's own choices and the craving for limits in these choices, we can act to satisfy their needs and reduce the frustration.

Give your young child two options whenever it is reasonable: two food items, two books for bedtime--just a few times a day--and see what difference you notice. Giving a choice *every* time something is about to happen can be way too often and make a child anxious or controlling, so just look for the reasonable times for a little person to have a choice. The more they can climb into the car seat on their own, carry their own bag, pour their own water, wipe up their own spill, choose between two foods, the better. But there is no reason to purchase two pairs of shoes or two coats just so a child can choose between them! There are natural limits in life, where there is often just one option, and there are plenty of times where there are many choices, which is when we want to present just two of them to our children.

Examples of choices:

*Would you like an apple or a banana?*

*Are you going to put on the blue socks or the red socks?*

*Do you want to sit by me or next to Grandpa?*

*Do you want to walk to the car or be carried?*

Only give choices that are reasonable and which you are content with. If you cannot carry your child, that isn't an option to propose; so instead, you can ask, "Would you like to walk holding *my* hand or shall I hold *your* hand?" (Amazingly, even this can sometimes satisfy a young child's need to be respected enough to exercise choice in the matter.)

In a gradual progression by age six, you might offer three reasonable choices and sometimes, a child may propose another agreeable option that shows they are becoming more responsibly independent. Some children need more limits (fewer choices), and some are fine with more choices (increased freedom). These are not value judgments, because giving a child what he or she needs is the best way to reach the final goal of being able to make good choices of their own. Observe your own children to decide whether they are handling more choices smoothly. Sticking to two choices is always a good strategy if you are unsure.

## Why Give Limits?

A real environment is set up with limits built into it. The consequences are natural ones. They are real. Glass breaks when thrown on the floor, and we sweep it up and put it in the trash or recycling bin. Water spills when a cup is tipped, and we mop it up. The broom, bin, and mop are part of the environment so that everything is ready for the child to participate in all stages of a realistic process. Every society has guidelines to help us exist in harmony, and our little children learn these guidelines by being invited to interact with a real environment that has limits built into it. Limits provide security and orientation.

We can also add guidelines that point our children to limits that help them. We might stitch a circle of thread onto a placemat to show where the plate can be placed, and a smaller one for the cup and an outline of a spoon for the placement of the utensil. We might use a sweeping guide (a semi-circle made of wood) so that young children can sweep a pile of dust to one decided spot in the room.

There are also logistical limits: Perhaps a child chooses an egg for lunch, but when the egg is ready to eat, she decides she wants a slice of turkey instead. We provide the reasonable limit, "We have an egg now. Tomorrow you can choose the turkey. Mmm, this egg looks very good. It is still warm." If she decides she doesn't want it now, that is her choice; we will not force it. But we are not going to give in and change the food. That would be taking away the limit that helps her to make her choice tomorrow and to realize the power of her own decision-making.

I think this could be why children who are given whatever they want get very anxious, because they actually feel powerless, not powerful. Nothing makes sense, because having adults give them whatever they want shows them no boundaries to live in, no security, no walls. The child who realizes, through experiences, that the next day she can make a choice again and can choose the turkey slice, (or the egg!) feels in control in a very real way. Now, if there are no more turkey slices because Dad ate them since yesterday...well, that adds another layer of reality; now we plan to go later to the grocery store and replenish our supply. The only choice is what is available, as disappointing as that may be at times.

## What is Responsibility?

Think of responsibility as being the result of exercising choices within limits. Responsibility does not come first, as in, "Behave responsibly and then I will see that you are responsible." Children cannot know how to be responsible until they have developed the ability to respond by their own decisions. In other words, *response-able*: able to respond because they are able to choose their own actions and then execute them.

The limits in an environment give children the boundaries that they can practice responding to. Through their continued experiences of making choices within limits, children become increasingly response-able. As they respond to the limits in the environment and make choices with these limits in mind, we call their behavior "responsible."

## What is Freedom?

Dr. Montessori referred often to the importance of giving children freedoms. Many people misunderstand these statements by thinking that she meant we need to "let children go." But Dr. Montessori was very clear that we mustn't allow children to do anything they wish, practicing their impulsivity. Doing so would not lead children to develop *inner* freedom, which is based on one's own decision-making ability and self-control. Montessori referred to giving children freedom with *choices* and *movement* as their minds directed them, but this is not a free-

for-all kind of freedom. In fact, she pointed out that, at first, children are reacting to their whims and are not truly free, but rather prisoners of impulses.

The term *freedom* in a Montessori context really refers to inner freedom, which is the result--not the starting point--of the process of developing a will. Yes, a child needs freedom to move and freedom to make decisions, but these are very specific freedoms that we can think of as *choices*. And unless there are limits in these choices, and some purposeful activity that moves the body and mind (such as sweeping up a spill or pouring water to drink into a cup), there can be no process through which to reach true inner freedom.

Inner freedom is the ultimate goal in this process. We all crave inner freedom, to think our own thoughts, make our own decisions, and follow our willpower to construct our lives. But it is only the limits of the world that make this possible. We cannot have anything we dream up, and these boundaries of reality give us security, a sense of place and purpose. Freedom is not license; it is not impulsive behavior. Freedom is having developed the self-control to make a choice and the willpower to decide and restrain oneself from one option in order to have another. This puts us in a relationship with our surroundings. We are in harmony with our surroundings when our actions have a connection to the next moment and to other people, objects, and conditions. Our children will find this wonderful harmony.

## An Education for Life

If you have older children, you can rely on the limits of reality when giving reasonable choices. Natural, built-in consequences often provide limits in the real world. Parents can cause more harm than good when we interfere too much with what is possible, carving out more choices to try to placate our children. We can also divert our children away from natural consequences by thinking we need to invent limits. A typical example might be when a teenager decides not to do her schoolwork, and her parents create a consequence such as, "You cannot have ice cream tonight until you've done your schoolwork." That may work only until the teenager doesn't care about ice cream, which is when the limit looks pretty silly and not realistic. And the savvy teenager can figure out that she can still get the ice cream, just later after everyone else has gone to sleep! Now the parent has a new problem: behavior to further correct with another invented consequence, and the cycle continues. And the thing is, that made-up consequence was not even necessary in this case because there was already a *real* consequence: If a teenager doesn't do her schoolwork, she probably won't learn the material, which will reflect in her grades or some other measurement of her performance or ability to proceed. It is up to the teenager to experience whether the grades are important. This is where we have to resist the urge to make our child's problem our problem. This is very hard to do, but if we raise our

children to have a real relationship with the natural limits of life from the beginning--with glass that breaks and mealtimes that end, for example--then she is more likely to think that her grades are her problem and not yours. She is more likely to respond to how her actions and the limits of life intersect. It's a mindset for life.

Stating your own limit as a parent, such as, "I take kids who do their week's schoolwork to the water park," or, "I drive kids to soccer who have tried to do well in school," can help you frame your role in supporting responsible behavior, but the *real* consequence is a limit of life. We do best when we (within reason) do not get between the real limits of life and our children.

Taking a Montessori approach at home with choices and limits helps your parent-child relationship from the very early years into adulthood. Because very young children need to develop their willpower and ability to make decisions when they are in the sensitive period to do so, we want to be especially aware to give them simple choices in their early years. Being consistent for our children is not always easy, but thank goodness we have time to keep practicing and working on it over the years! Developing willpower is a gradual process, and its peak focus time is between ages one and three. It pays off when your little ones feel more satisfied with their decision-making needs being met, and ultimately, it helps them prepare for the greater world and their actions in it. When we give choices and limits, the result is freedom and responsibility.