

Hierarchy of Interventions: Forced Choice / Weighted Choice Technique

Intervention: Forced Choice / Weighted Choice

The Forced Choice technique involves a staff person presenting a client with a couple behavioral choices and then insisting on those being *the only choices* for the kid to make in that moment.

Typically, these choices include a potential consequence in response to how the kid is acting. Specifically what consequences are used will differ based on the norms of your specific program but as an example, a Forced Choice might sound like a staff person saying:

- “I’m done debating this. Right now, you have to make a choice. You can sit back down at the meal table, showing respectful behaviors and interactions until dinner is over, *or* there’ll be no screentime for this evening.”

Again, that’s just an example, the specific consequence used in a Forced Choice situation should be realistic, enforceable, reasonable, achievable, logical, proportional, consistent, and predictable for how your unit routinely operates.

The Weighted Choice technique is a variation on the Forced Choice, but the staff person frames one of the choices as more appealing.

- “Right now, you have to make a choice. You can sit back down at the meal table, showing respectful behaviors and interactions, until dinner is over – which means just 10 more minutes of being a positive part of the group. Or, you’ll lose electronics tonight, which I know is something you really like. I know what I’d pick, but it’s up to you to choose.”

So, using the Forced Choice or Weighted Choice techniques requires some real judgment and skill. The sense of conflict can escalate a client who is already overwhelmed by their own feelings.

Use with kids who particularly struggle with taking responsibility for their own actions, their own choices, their own behaviors, feelings, and thoughts. A lot of that benefit happens afterwards, when a staff person, ideally, will process a little bit with the kid who was forced to make a choice, and can reinforce the notion that the child or youth chose that consequence.

These techniques are also a great way to get out of control battles. A control battle is when a child or youth gets a staff person to, essentially, get into an argument with them. Many kids in residential treatment are extremely practiced and truly expert at that.

Three Steps for dealing with control-battles:

1. Develop the self-awareness to realize that you’ve been drawn into a pointless control battle!
2. Accept that that means you’ve already lost. Stop trying to “win” an argument or badger a kid into complying with your authority. The client doesn’t “win” by winning the argument. The child or youth “wins” by *continuing* the argument. There’s little to no counseling value in

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arguing with clients. So, as the staff person you must shift your focus from whatever the specific argument is about to ending the control battle.

3. End the control-battle. One effective technique is to firmly and calmly state that you are done arguing. You're done debating something, you're done trying to convince a kid about something, you have nothing more to say, right now, on that specific topic. You might explain that the current disagreement is not good for the client and is not good for you. You refuse to continue to engage in the specific control battle. Instead you present the client with the choice they now have to make. Right now, the only thing you'll discuss is the choice you've presented to the kid.

Because you want the client to make a thoughtful choice, your tone and style should be as low-key and calming as possible. The more emotionally escalated the child, the harder it is for them to be thoughtful. Odds are that the child or youth has become somewhat escalated while arguing.

That makes it harder for them to think straight and to make thoughtful choices. Likewise, as a staff person, you have to be aware of how emotionally escalated you've become, which can certainly happen when a child or youth draws you into a control battle. The skilled counselor then presents the choices in a calm fashion.

- “Okay... I'm done arguing about this. What we're doing right now is not good for you or for me. At this point, here's the choice you have to make... I hope you'll really think about which choice is best for you, right now. You can either....”

Both options must be realistic and enforceable. Sometimes kids will make the choice that you hoped they would not make. That's part of how people learn.

When kids freeze in the face of a Forced or Weighted Choice, refusing to make a choice, an effective technique is to give the kid a time limit. With younger kids, you might count aloud. With older kids you might look at a wrist watch, a stop watch app, or wall clock.

So with a younger kid, you might say something like, “I'll give you a count of 5 to make your choice. If you can't commit to appropriate mealtime behaviors by then, it means you're choosing the consequence. 1... 2... 3... 4... 5.... Okay, that means you've made your choice. No electronics tonight.”

With older kids, you might say something like, “Okay, I'll give you thirty seconds to make your choice. Either sit back down and respect the basic expectations, or it will mean no electronics.” I then might stare at my watch in an exaggerated fashion, I might even announce when 15 seconds have gone by, or I might look at a wall clock. I will not engage directly with the client during this period. This breaking of eye contact can help youth back down from what feels like a direct challenge or threat and become able to think a little more clearly.

Kids should be praised for making good choices. That's a great way to take a negative exchange and turn it into something more positive.