

# *Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies*

## *Parts 2 - 4*

Behavior modification strategies you can use to quickly modify habits and behaviors.



By Cara Day, M.A., C.E.C.

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# *Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies*

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One Sticker per Day  
Two Stickers per Day  
Three Stickers per Day  
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# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

There are two parts to creating a successful outcome with a Behavior-specific Modification Strategy.

**Part A:** Pre-meeting

**Part B:** Follow-up

The pre-meeting helps the child understand the behavior and how it affecting both them, and others. During the meeting, you generate replacement behaviors, discuss the modification strategy itself, and then discuss the consequences and rewards for them for holding onto as well as releasing the behavior or habit.

## Pre-Meeting Steps:

1. Discuss the habit in detail.
2. Discuss the effects of the habit.
3. Discuss the replacement behavior and its benefits.
4. Discuss exactly how the BSMS will work
5. Discuss the rewards and consequences for possible outcomes.

**Step 1:** Discuss the habit in detail with your child. It also involves describing what you have observed.

When you describe the habit, use non-judgmental, observational language. For example, with Mackenzie's habit, it would sound like this:

"You have been asking a lot of questions lately. You sometimes ask five or ten questions within a few minutes. You ask questions that have obvious answers. For example, last night when I was spooning the spaghetti onto our plates, you asked, 'What's for dinner?' I love that you are so curious, and that you ask questions. I never want you to stop being curious. But when you ask too many questions, it feels a little exhausting for the rest of us.

Another example is when we are all getting ready to leave. I have four of you to help get ready and many other things I am thinking about when we are working to get out the door with everything we need. Sometimes you start asking me many questions about what we are doing, where we are going, who is going, what car we are taking and things like that.

Imagine if all of you kids were doing that! It's a lot for me to get everyone going and also have to answer your questions the whole time I'm getting everything ready. I know you're just excited and that you love talking with me, but when you do this in the form of questions, it's very tiring and kind of annoying."



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

**Step 2:** Discuss the effects of the habit.

Describing effects of the habit would sound like this:

“When you ask a lot of questions, it’s tempting for me to tune you out. I don’t want to ignore your questions because I always want you to give you answers to your important questions.

But some of your questions are just too much and aren’t really necessary for you to ask, so I sometimes just feel like ignoring you, and that makes me feel sad. I don’t ever want to ignore you! Also, if you do this with friends or other people not in our family, they may think you’re annoying, and that you’re trying to get attention.

I want you to get attention for all of the wonderful things you do, not because you’re asking a lot of unnecessary questions.”

**Step 3:** Discuss the replacement behavior and its benefits.

When you ask a child to stop a habit, it’s often helpful to give them a replacement habit or behavior that will work better for them. If desired, you can brainstorm these with your child. If that’s not necessary or appropriate, simply tell your child what the replacement behavior will be. Describe for them, in detail, how it will look and feel for them to do the replacement behavior instead. Describe what it will be like for everyone else, too.

This is what it would sound like for Mackenzie’s example:

“When you feel like you want to ask a question, I want you to press your pause button. After you press it, I want you to ask yourself, “How can I help myself right now?” Helping yourself might be looking around to answer your own question. Or, it may mean you will take a cleansing breath and be ok with not knowing the answer just yet.

Or, you could write your question down in a question book instead of saying it out loud.

Or, it may mean saying an affirmation. A good affirmation for this behavior would be for you to gently say to yourself, ‘The unknown holds wonderful surprises.’ or you could say, ‘I am present.’ When you are present and ready for surprises, you will experience more fun.

I want to see you happy and engaging in what we are doing, instead of feeling like you have to be constantly talking or asking questions about what we are doing. I also want you to ask me questions about things you are genuinely curious about, things we can really talk about. Do any of these ideas seem like they might help you?”



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

Let your child share which strategies they will try, if you presented more than one. They can also share any ideas they might have, and you can chat those through. Agree on which replacement behaviors will be working toward. Wrap up this step by describing the benefits of their replacement behavior. Remember to focus on the benefits they will experience, although it's ok to mention the benefits for others, too.

It would sound like this:

"When you stop asking unnecessary questions, everyone around you is going to pay even more attention when you do talk or ask a question. No one will be annoyed with you because of the questions, and you'll feel great knowing people have a lot of fun when you are around.

You'll also feel great for overcoming this habit that hasn't been working so well for you. And you'll know that you can send away any other bad habits that creep up, your whole life through. This is such an important skill for all of us!"

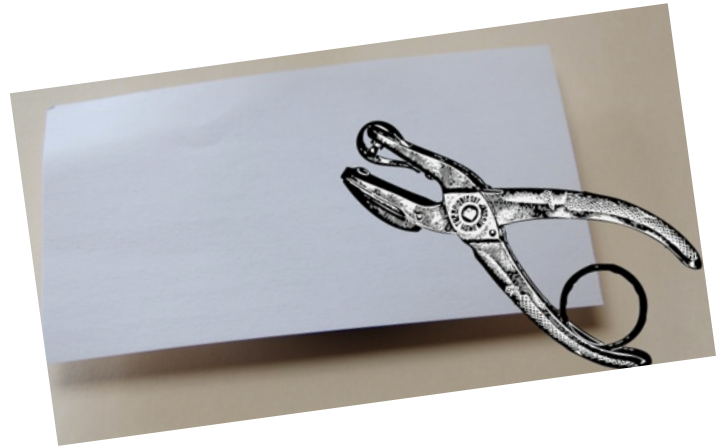
Ok, so now that your child has a clear understanding of why their behavior has not been working for them and others, it's time to implement the Behavior-specific Modification Strategy. Get the materials you need, whether an index card and puncher, or whatever is needed for your chosen strategy.

**Step 4:** Discuss exactly how the strategy will work.

Now, you get to describe the strategy to your child so they know exactly how it will work. Let them ask clarifying questions.

So, in Mackenzie's example, this is what I said...

"Every day you'll be able to ask 20 questions. Every time you ask a question, you will punch one hole into the card. Once you've used up your questions, you won't be able to ask any more questions until the next day."



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

**Step 5:** Discuss the rewards and consequences for possible outcomes. This means, the positive and the negative. Brainstorm with your child to come up with the final reward for eliminating or modifying the habit.

If there is something your child has been wanting, this might be the time to make that a possibility. I know one family who got a new puppy for their son when he stopped biting his nails. The habit was so strong and they were so highly motivated to help him stop it, that they went big on the reward.

But rewards don't always need to be that big! You want to use the least possible reward that will motivate your child. Don't overdo it.

Consider:

- How difficult it will be for my child to overcome the habit?
- How important is it that they overcome it?
- How difficult it will be for my child to overcome the habit?

Here are some possible rewards:

Take your child to sushi or another favorite dinner out

Have friends over for a movie night with pizza, candy, and popcorn

Let your child stay up permanently later, such as 30 minutes, or even an hour later, if appropriate for your child's age

Get them a phone, or a new phone

Allow another privilege your child wants, such as being able to do something you have previously said no to

Give your child a gift certificate to a particular store

Take them to get mani-pedis with a group friends

Spend a day at the beach, lake, or another outdoor place your child likes

Go to an amusement park of their choosing

Or, you name it, any other reward that will engage your child!

**10 days!**

After you determine the reward, let your child know exactly what will need to be done, and for what length of time, in order to receive the reward. You don't want to buy your child a new phone or a new puppy for eradicating a difficult behavior, only to have them start up with the behavior again a week later.

While research shows it typically only takes about 10 days to break a habit, it can take a few months to really have new behaviors set in and stick. Depending on the age of your child, and the behavior they are eliminating, you might want to wait a month or two after they stop the behavior before they receive their reward. If it's a lesser or newer habit they are breaking, two weeks may be sufficient.





# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

At this point, you will also want to describe the consequences if the child does not engage in modifying the habit. Maybe they are biting their nails and they do not want to stop doing that--they don't see it as a big deal. You can let them know that it is not a choice for them to not engage and that if they don't engage, they will not only not get a reward, but they will suffer negative consequences, such as loss of some of their belongings or activities that they enjoy.



In this example, I would explain, “Biting your nails is a habit that isn’t going to work well for you, health-wise, or socially. Watching someone chew on their fingers is not fun for those who are around the person. And, it’s something you’ll do unconsciously when you’re stressed. It’s a behavior most people don’t want in a spouse, friend, or employee.

It’s also super dirty because your hands collect more germs than any other part of your body throughout the day, and you’re putting that right into your mouth, without even thinking about it. We see your nail-biting as the same as if you decided to stop brushing your teeth. It’s unacceptable.”



This concludes the steps of the Pre-Meeting. Next up, three more behavior-specific modification strategies, as well as how to have a Follow-Up meeting.

## **Behavior-Specific Star Chart**

The second strategy is a Behavior-Specific Star Chart. This is used to track a behavior over a specific length of time. The increment of time depends on the age and specifics of the child, as well as the behavior itself.

An example of when you might use a Behavior-Specific Star Chart is for a child who is:

- Being bossy
- Being negative
- Complaining
- Crying excessively or unnecessarily
- Not completing basic tasks
- Not sitting through dinner
- Lying

It would work for many of the other behaviors on the list presented in the first part of this video series as well.

First, you would use the Pre-Meeting to introduce the Behavior-Specific Star Chart to your child.



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

In order to implement this strategy, you will want to think about your child and decide how frequently he or she will need to see a sticker put on the chart in order to be motivated. For a child who can easily delay gratification and is perhaps a bit older, one star per day is good. For a child who is younger, a morning, afternoon, and evening star may provide the motivation needed.

For a even younger child, or a child who has difficulty delaying gratification, an hourly star may do the trick. Choose the least frequency required to provide the necessary motivation. Here's an example of how to start, post, and complete a Behavior-Specific Star Chart.

Print the chart. Fill out your child's name and the behavior they are working toward. State it in a positive way. For example, instead of saying, "Stop Lying," you will want to write, "Tell the Truth." Post the star chart on the refrigerator or other appropriate location. Every format of the star chart is available in the appendix of this e-book.

**MY CHOICES**

I AM CHOOSING TO

-----

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5
AM					
PM					

A star-chart for two stickers per day.

A star-chart for three stickers per day. There is also one for every hour.

**MY CHOICES**

I AM CHOOSING TO

-----

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5
MORNING					
AFTERNOON					
EVENING					



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

If you've implemented the Choice Chart, you can post your behavior-specific start chart right next to that. Give your child a sticker for each time increment, whether day, half-day, or hourly, for which he or she displays the desired behavior, or doesn't display the undesirable behavior, depending on how you have set it up.

During the pre-meeting you will have determined at what interval they receive their reward, as well as what it is. At the end of the earning period, give the reward.

The Behavior-specific Star Chart falls away as soon as you feel the new behavior is your child's new norm. If you covered all of the important steps of the pre-meeting, you shouldn't need to bring the star chart back at a later time for the same behavior. But sometimes you might need to, and that's ok. After all, that's why kids are here, to learn, with you as their loving, patient guide.

## **Token System**

This next strategy is called a "token system." It's called a token system because your child receives a physical item that represents, or is a token of, the fact that they have made a particular choice. One way to implement a token system is to get a jar. Get marbles, a bag of small rocks, smooth craft rocks, or a big bag of pennies.

Every time you see the desired behavior, or experience an absence of the undesired behavior, drop a token in the jar or can. When your child hears the clinking sound, you have added an auditory element to the behavior modification strategy. This increases their memory traces around it, making it more powerful for your child.

If the behavior still applies when you are out and about, you just can say, wherever you are, "You just earned a token." Be sure to drop the token in when you get home. You can let your child do the dropping, as long as you monitor the amount that is being dropped. Or, you can decide that you are the official dropper. In this case, let your child watch you drop the object into the jar.

When the jar or can is full, or reaches a designated mark you have made on the side of the jar, your child can receive their reward. This is an important mark, because it determines when your child will receive the reward.



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

If you want your child to get a reward every day or two at first, then you need to use a small jar. If you want your child to earn their reward over a 30-day period, you will want a much bigger jar.

One part of this system that you really want to think about ahead of time is to determine how many tokens to give each day, that is, at what pace. You don't want to give too many too quickly, or they will earn a reward long before they have released the habit. My recommendation is to be less generous with the tokens in the beginning, so won't have to pull back later, which won't be good timing for pulling back, because chances are they will be earning a lot more tokens at that point. So, again, start slow and get a feel for how many you should give in a day before overdoing it.

Sometimes people ask, "Should I take tokens out of the jar when my child displays the undesirable behavior?" Usually, you don't take tokens out of the jar with this system, even when your child shows the undesirable behavior. But, I do know some parents and classroom teachers who have done this quite effectively.

Like with everything, think about your unique situation, and make it work for you. And, if you start something and then find it's not working, just modify it until it does work.

Here are some examples of how you might describe for your child when exactly they will receive a token:



- For nailbiting, you might say, "For every hour that you do not put your fingers in your mouth, you will earn a token."
- For complaining you might say, "Each time there is an opportunity where you might have usually complained but chose not to, you will earn a token."
- For asking too many questions, you might say, "For every hour that you ask what I decide is an appropriate number of questions, you will earn a token."

Notice that the language is choice-oriented. Notice that the power is with the child. They earn tokens. It's not you giving them a token. It's them earning a token.

This may seem like a subtle difference, but you will see as you experience the language recommended in all of our videos, that it is precisely these small, subtle differences in language and communication that distinguish excellent parenting from the rest.

Excellent parenting is a decision.

# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

## Surprise Gift Basket

The next activity is perfect for wee little ones. It's highly visual and involves something all little children love--presents! Many times parents ask me if it's ok to give prizes, presents, or money as incentives for different things. My answer is always a resounding yes! I also believe in bribery in the right circumstances.

It's ok to reward children with material items for behaviors you wish to see. And it's incredibly important to couple those prizes with thoughtful language that helps the child see and understand what they have accomplished with their choices.

By talking about the behavior, and reinforcing for your child how well their new choice is working for them and the greater good, you will help your child transition from being extrinsically-motivated to being intrinsically-motivated. Being extrinsically motivated means we are working for something outside of ourselves, such as money, or an experience, or even praise from another person.

- Money
- Experiences
- Words of praise

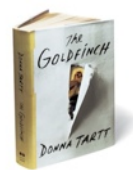
Being intrinsically motivated means we are working because of something we feel inside of ourselves that moves us to do a certain behavior.



Most behavior in life centers around a combination of both. That is, most adults work, for example, both to earn money so they can enjoy the things they want to do in life, as well as to accomplish something they feel good about.

Yet, even if someone doesn't like their life work, they can still be intrinsically motivated to work hard, simply because they can see other benefits in their lives as a result of their hard work, such as providing for a family, or getting to spend their money doing fun things.

Using money and prizes with children mirrors this. It is true that at first, the child may do the behavior just to get the prize. But the idea is, that in time, they will continue the behavior because they see how well the new behavior works for them, and soon will no longer need an extrinsic motivator. Also, sometimes in life, we all need to be bribed a little. I know I bribe myself almost daily to do things I don't feel like doing. It's a little game I play with myself that makes life more fun.



I'll say to myself, "I'll go for my run after I fill out those forms." I like running. I don't like filling out paperwork. So, I place the undesirable behavior before the desirable one. I also bribe myself with material things. I'll say to myself, "I'll go buy that new book after I finish organizing these two closets." Knowing I'm going to get to dive into my new book as soon as the chore is done speeds up the cleaning process by probably half of what it would have been otherwise.

Self-bribery is a very important and very practical life skill! And that's why I'm A-Ok with bribing children in certain circumstances.

# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

Back to the Surprise Gift Basket, which is perfect for little ones aged three to eight. The surprise gift basket is perfect for incentivizing your child to do a desired behavior, and it can work for eliminating behaviors as well.

For example, let's say you're potty-training 2 - 4 year old. Every time your child uses the potty for #1, or #2, or both, depending on which one you're working on, they get to pick a prize from the basket. Another good time to use a surprise basket would be for a child who is working on staying in their bed once they have been put down for their nap or for the night. If they stay in bed, they get to go straight to the prize basket when they wake up.

Yet another might be letting your child pick a prize after they have sat politely through dinner, for the length of time you specify, and have done a good job eating or trying the foods you have served.

To use the surprise gift basket to help eliminate a behavior, you can let your child pick a prize every day, or half day that they do not display the undesirable behavior. You can say, "All morning, you used your words instead of crying when you wanted something! You get to pick a surprise!"

To make a surprise gift basket, you will need to buy a lot of small gifts, typically ranging in price from 10 cents to \$2 per prize. What you spend it up to you. You'll want to wrap each prize separately in colorful paper so the basket becomes a very bright visual for your child.

Place the wrapped prizes in a large basket that can be left out in the kitchen or other active area of your home. Make sure it is highly visible to your child by putting it right on the kitchen counter or in the middle of a table. At a set time of day, or on a variable, intermittent schedule, let your child choose a present from the basket. Announce, "You may pick a surprise for keeping your hands to yourself all morning."

If you want to use the surprise gift basket to modify a behavior with siblings, that's just fine. Just buy more prizes, and then they all get to pick a prize when you say it's time. An example of when this may work well is when it's something they are working on together, such as not arguing with each other, or keeping their shared bedroom, or a playroom clean.

Food treats are fine to wrap up in the basket. However, you will want to avoid food treats if your child has a weight issue or if there is a history of eating disorders in the family. In this circumstance, you will not want to withhold or reward your child with food. Just stick to non-food prizes.

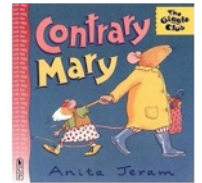
Keep the basket going until the desired behavior is established, or until the undesirable behavior has fallen away. Be sure to get prizes your child will really enjoy, so you can be sure they will serve as a motivator. But, of course, you don't want to break the bank either.



# Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

## The Choices Book

The next activity is great to use at home, as well as by a teacher with a particular student in the classroom. Or, it can be used whole class. It's called The Choices Book and it works well with children aged 8 and up. I made this book up, once again, for my sweet little Mackenzie.



This is the perfect strategy for when your child seems to lack an awareness around a undesirable behavior, or around themselves in general. At this time, Mackenzie was talking back on a daily basis, and it was creating a lot of negative energy in our home. Although sometimes her arguments were worthy, most of the time she was just being contrary.

It was exhausting and annoying. She did receive penalties for this behavior and serve isolation through the Choice Chart, but at this point the difference was that she also had to write in her Choices Book.

Another important element is that the child also writes positive choices that they make into the Choices Book.

Here's how it works.

MY CHOICES	
My choice:	_____
This choice meant:	_____
My choice:	_____
This choice meant:	_____
My choice:	_____
This choice meant:	_____
My choice:	_____
This choice meant:	_____
My choice:	_____
This choice meant:	_____

Each page of the Choices book looks exactly the same. It says, over and over down the page, "The choice I made..." and below that, "This choice meant..." Throughout the day, you ask your child to write certain choices they make into the book. Try to pick choices throughout the day that will serve the purpose of helping your child develop an awareness around the choices they are making that are both working well and not so well for them.

An entry looks like this:

**The choice I made...**was to put towels down on the floor under the sink before I gave Cassatt a bath." (Cassatt is our dog.)

**This choice meant...**water did not get all over the floor. Mom said it was very helpful that I made such a good choice."

Another entry might look like this:

**The choice I made...**was to talk back to mom about my clothes.

**This choice meant...**I got a penalty, I served my isolation time, she took my favorite shirt, and everyone in the house felt bad hearing me argue.

It's good to try to have your child write a few of their positive choices for every one of their negative choices. Try to do a 3:1 positive to negative ratio, so your child feels noticed and motivated.



Otherwise, it's easy to fall into a criticism trap that's hard to climb out of. It will be necessary in the beginning for you to help your child to see all of the negative outcomes of their poor choices. At first they may say they don't know what to write. It's ok if you script it out for them at first. After all, if they were self-aware, they wouldn't be doing the behavior in the first place.

Help them think of the physical consequences:

"I served an isolation. Mom took my favorite shirt."

Help them think of the social and emotional consequences:

"Everyone in the house felt bad hearing me argue."

I used this book twice while my children were growing up. Each time, we used it for a couple of weeks. By using this book, the child begins to see patterns in their behavior. These can be very enlightening for all.

Discuss any patterns you notice with your child, and give your child strategies for avoiding these choices based on what you find. You can strategize together. Do this in a loving and supportive way. Also, another motivator is that the child will get tired of writing in the book. This alone speeds the establishment of better behavior choices.

I love the Choices book because it works. It's a powerful way to help a child gain awareness around themselves and an awareness of what life is like for the people who interact with them each day. And, if you keep the book, it's fun, and even funny, to read once you're kids are grown.

Here are some final thoughts on behavior specific modification strategies. You'll remember that Part A of a behavior-specific modification strategy is having the pre-meeting and implementing the strategy.

**Part B** is following up once you feel your child has either released their undesirable behavior and/or has developed a new desirable behavior. Following up involves asking your child how they feel about their accomplishment and giving them the reward that you agreed upon in the Pre-Meeting.

You can make giving the reward to them a special event and turn it into a little celebration, or you can just give it to them quietly, whichever seems better in the given situation.

Another element I want to mention is that sometimes everyone in the family will need to be aware that the child is working on the behavior. This would be the case when the behavior affects other people in the family, which is most often the case.





But sometimes, depending on what it is, you may decide to keep it private from your other children. For example, if your child is swearing or not taking good care of their belongings, this may be something that does not involve or need to involve your other children.

When you show respect to children by giving them some privacy around discipline as well as other areas in life, you help them develop a strong sense of self-respect.

This is because the level of respect you show to your children as they grow will become what they know, and therefore how they will treat both themselves and others in return when they are grown.

As adults, our default tendency is to re-create what we experienced as children because even if it was a less-than experience, it's comfortable for us, we know it.

So, it's a great thing to use every opportunity to show to your child and to say to your child, "I respect you," even when they are in need of behavior modification. This will help your child learn to be gentle with themselves when they make poor choices.

Having a strong sense of self-respect will help them learn from the poor choices and the mistakes that they make along the way in their lives.

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# APPENDIX

# MY CHOICES

I AM CHOOSING TO

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I T ' S U P T O M E

# MY CHOICES

I AM CHOOSING TO

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	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5
AM					
PM					
AM					
PM					
AM					
PM					

I T ' S U P T O M E

# MY CHOICES

I AM CHOOSING TO

---

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5
MORNING					
AFTERNOON					
EVENING					
MORNING					
AFTERNOON					
EVENING					

I T ' S U P T O M E

# MY CHOICES

I AM CHOOSING TO

---

TODAY IS _____			
9 A.M.		3 P.M.	
10 A.M.		4 P.M.	
11 A.M.		5 P.M.	
12 NOON		6 P.M.	
1 P.M.		7 P.M.	
2 P.M.		8 P.M.	

I T ' S U P T O M E

# MY CHOICES

BY \_\_\_\_\_

I T ' S U P T O M E

# MY CHOICES

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My choice: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This choice meant: \_\_\_\_\_

I T ' S U P T O M E



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Some other videos, e-books, and articles available at Daychild:

## **Videos and e-books:**

The Choice Chart Behavior Management System: Parts 1 - 6

The Multiplier and Divider Rules: Tools for Self-Regulation and Basic Manners

Behavior-Specific Modification Strategies

## **E-books:**

The Chit-Chat: A communication tool

Winning Ways to Speak

I Am a Happy Kid

Integrity Lessons, 1- 10: Character Development for All Ages

## **Resources:**

Ten Ways to Trick Yourself into Exercising Everyday

How to Anchor Two People

Ten Reasons Your Stepchild Doesn't Like You, And 10 Winning Ways to Respond

There are many Free and Member videos, e-books, and resources available at Daychild.org. Annual membership is introductory-priced at Super Cheap! Your membership helps us make more videos, e-books, and resources for you, and we appreciate YOU!