



## THE POWER OF CHOICES FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

03/16/2012



One of the tragedies of divorce for children is the feeling of helplessness. Many adults who experienced their parents' divorce report that, as children, they felt powerless and vulnerable. For the children, it seems as though everything is out of control. Changing routines, people moving out, and things and belongings disappearing are just a few of the changes these children experience. There is no preparation for many children. So often the adults in a child's life don't talk about or explain what is taking place. The children are left to their own imaginations.

Children react differently. For some children the loss of power and feelings of helplessness will thrust them into acting out and aggressive behaviors. These children come across as distracted, not able to concentrate and not able to hold still or cooperate. Leaders will need to work at empowering them. Some of you may be thinking of particular children, and you may be saying,

*"Empower them? They are totally disrupting the group now. Give them more power?  
No way!"*

### How to Empower Children in a Healthy Way

I want to encourage you to change your mindset about these children. Somewhere I read that every aggressive child is a hurting child. I believe this to be true for the aggressive children of divorce in any group situation. The first course of action is to lift these children up to the Lord by name. Don't hold back with God; He can handle all that you have to say.

Next is to figure out how to give them back some of their power. Their acting out and their anger is their power. It's one of the few things they still have control over. You can't make a child stop being angry. You can't make a child behave. Giving children personal power and empowering children is different than allowing them to be in control of the group. Empowering them is simply giving them a sense of confidence and control in their own life.

One way to give children back their power is to give them some control over their choices and decisions. You can do this the minute they walk in the room. As the children walk in, greet each child with

*"Hello [child's name], I'm glad you made the choice to come this week. You have a choice of what to do."*





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For the older child you can substitute the word option for choice. At this point take your cue from the child. If he or she makes a choice, then comment on a good decision being made. If the child shrugs his or her shoulders or ignores you, then narrow things down and give two choices:

*"You may hang up your coat or keep it on."*

For an older child you could say,

*"Feel free to hang up your coat or keep it on. What would be better for you?"*

(Dialogue from Dr. Becky Bailey's *Conscious Discipline*, [www.consciousdiscipline.org](http://www.consciousdiscipline.org), p. 142.)

Don't stop with giving the choices, but follow through by asking for a commitment.

*"So what's your choice?"*

If the child hesitates, you can repeat the options. If the child chooses something entirely different and it's an okay choice, then comment on the child making a good decision.

*"You chose \_\_\_\_\_. Wow, I hadn't even thought of that choice. That's a good choice for you."*

If the child tries to choose something that is not an option, then say,

*"\_\_\_\_\_ is not a choice right now."*

Repeat the choices available and ask for the commitment.

Throughout the entire class continue to give choices. If a child begins to get out of control, be matter of fact. Let's use the example of a child becoming obnoxious during the discussion time.

*"Johnny, Kara is talking. You have a choice: you can listen to her words or you can leave the group. What is your choice?"*

Worst-case scenario: he says he will listen but continues to be obnoxious. You then say,

*"You have a choice. You can go over to the table and work in your workbook, or you can choose to go read a story. What's your choice?"*

Just keep giving him choices.





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If he shouts out,

*"I hate you. I hate this class,"*

Or;

*"You can't make me,"*

don't get caught up in an argument. Simply state in a matter-of-fact tone of voice,

*"That's too bad, Johnny. I can't make you like this class. I hope you will choose to be a part of our class family."*

Or;

*"You are right Johnny. I can't make you listen. I hope you choose to be a part of our class family."*

Turn away from the child and give your attention to Kara. You may have to disband the group discussion at this point and move into the next activity. Be matter of fact, stay in control and move on. It also helps to be aware of how your voice sounds. Keep it in control and calm. Look at your body stance; are your arms and shoulders relaxed? Are your eyes soft and twinkling, and is your face calm? STAY CALM and IN CONTROL YOURSELF!

### Power Struggles

I want to warn you to be very careful with some of these children that you don't get caught up in a power struggle. It takes two people to have a power struggle. If you don't enter it, then there is no power struggle. Another thing to remember about power struggles is many times the child wanting to pull you into a power struggle may not feel safe, and if you enter the power struggle, you will only be reinforcing the child's perception of "un-safeness." A child needs to know that the adults are strong enough to be in control.

### The Benefits of Giving Choices

It's amazing to watch these children's self-confidence grow as you give them choices. In time you will see the aggressive behaviors calm down also. This is a wonderful life skill that you will be instilling in these children. When you think about it, isn't that what God does with us? He gives us choices. He doesn't force us or make us. He offers us the choice of accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior. He offers us the choice of eternal life. The decision is ours.





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*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda's website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\) \[http://www.hlp4.com\]](http://www.hlp4.com). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at [Linda@hlp4.com](mailto:Linda@hlp4.com).*

