



What Precisely Do We Mean By Giving "Children a Voice?"

Giving a child a voice does not automatically grant them final choice or decision-making power, but it ensures their views are heard, respected, and considered, particularly in custody or care situations. While voice empowers, it is often separated from choice to prevent placing adult burdens on children, allowing them to feel in control without responsibility for outcomes. Key aspects of "voice vs. choice" for children:

- Purpose of Voice: Empowering children to express feelings aids emotional healing and development, giving them agency over their lives.
- Legal/Custody Context: A child's voice is considered in legal matters, but final decisions rely on the "best interests" standard, which may not align with their expressed preference.
- Developmental Choice: Younger children may be given limited choices (e.g., between two options) to practice decision-making, while older children may have more input on larger matters.
- The Nuance: "Voice" means being heard, while "Choice" involves determining the outcome. Providing a voice is often about allowing them to influence decisions rather than dictating them.

Voice, Not Choice

In child development and legal contexts, the phrase "voice, not choice" is frequently used to distinguish between a child's right to be heard and their authority to make final decisions.

- Voice: Refers to the child's ability to express views, feelings, and preferences. It empowers them, builds self-esteem, and ensures they feel valued.
- Choice: Refers to the final decision-making power. In many scenarios, such as Child Custody Cases or medical decisions, adults (parents or judges) hold the final choice based on the child's best interests, even after hearing the child's voice.

VOICE	CHOICE
"I feel anxious going back and forth."	"I refuse to go."
"I miss Dad when I'm at Mom's."	"I'm not going."
Expressing experience	Making the decision
Considered by adults	Decided by the child



Why the Distinction Exists

- Maturity and Safety: Parents and professionals remain responsible for major decisions—like health, safety, and long-term well-being—because they have more experience and wisdom.
- Scaffolding Autonomy: Giving children a "voice" allows them to practice decision-making skills. As they mature, their voice gradually gains more weight until they reach legal adulthood, where they gain full "choice".
- Psychological Benefits: Feeling heard ("having a voice") can reduce resentment and anxiety in children, even if the final outcome is not what they wanted.

The Gold Standard

Healthy application of a child's voice means:

1. The child can express feelings safely.
2. Adults validate emotional experience.
3. Adults maintain appropriate boundaries.
4. Decisions remain grounded in best interests.



A child deserves a voice — not the weight of adult responsibility.