

## Helping your children learn self-control

Teaching your child to handle her feelings in a positive way without temper tantrums, biting, and hitting is one of the most important jobs for parents. If you think of misbehaviors as a chance to teach self-control, you can help your child grow.

### Self-control

What is self-control? Self-control is the ability to think before you act, rather than being controlled by your feelings. Self-control means that a person takes time to think about the consequences before choosing an action instead of acting on feelings alone. You might ask your child to wait nicely in line for a turn on the slide. Children who are learning self-control will be able to stop themselves from pushing and shoving the children ahead of them because they understand they might lose a turn on the slide from this misbehavior. Children with self-control can make decisions that lead to positive things like having fun on the slide.

### What can I do to help my child?

It is never too late to help a child build more self-control, but self-control lessons start in the first year of life.

### Birth through toddler years

The beginning of self-control comes when your baby cries and you respond. Many people believe that you can spoil babies by responding to their cries. Research shows that when you respond predictably to an infant who cries, later on that baby is likely to cry less rather than more. Get to know your baby's style of soothing. For instance, some children need movement to calm down and love to be rocked.

As your baby grows he may begin rocking himself back and forth in his crib. Allow your child to comfort and calm himself in this way. Toddlerhood is a demanding time both for parent and child. Many toddlers become frustrated because they may have trouble making themselves understood or may be too little to do the things they want to do. **Expect toddlers to have little self-control.**

You can help your child behave at her best by keeping her on a regular schedule as much as possible. Help her to get enough rest and serve regular meals and snacks.



Watch carefully for signs that your child is becoming hungry and overtired. At this age children are very distractible — you can redirect them to another activity when they are doing something unsafe. If your child has a temper tantrum, make sure she's safe and keep her from hurting herself or others. After the tantrum is over she'll need your comfort and support. Teach some basic words, such as NO and STOP, to use in difficult situations. These words will help your child feel safer. The goal of self-control at this age is to help children begin to use words to express themselves.

### Self-control matters

When children do not have much self-control they will do things without thinking about the consequences. This means they often end up facing the negative consequences of their own impulsive behavior. When the child is young, this causes many frustrations. As the child grows the problems can grow as well and the consequences can become more and more serious even leading to self-destructive behavior like the use of drugs and alcohol. So it is important to start young to build the skills that children will need later in life.

## The preschool years

Preschoolers are eager to play with children their own age, but this play is rarely smooth. The goal of this stage of development is to learn how to talk about a problem and solve it with words rather than aggression. Even a three-year-old can begin to use conflict resolution to solve problems with an adult's help. Encourage children to say what the problem is and ask them to come up with ideas for a solution. The solutions that kids come up with can be wonderfully creative. As long as all the children involved agree, let them try out their own solutions.

This is the time to introduce family chores. Simple jobs like setting the table and putting away laundry are good for children of this age. Research has found that children who have regular chores from the age of 4 are more successful in early adulthood.

Expect that children will still have trouble waiting for a turn and sharing, but that they will become better at doing these things. When your child shows self-control make sure you notice and praise him.



### Early to bed

No one is at their best when they don't get enough sleep. Did you know that most preschool children are not getting enough rest? Most people are surprised to learn that it is recommended that children of this age get eleven to thirteen hours of sleep each night. Most children in this country are not even getting the lowest recommended amount. Adults can't expect children to behave or do their best when they do not get enough sleep. So make sure your children get the sleep they need.

## Stress and self-control

Expect that children will lose some of their ability to control themselves when they are under stress. Normal stresses, such as the birth of a sibling or the start of a new child care program, can strain children's controls. Other stresses include a parent's job loss, divorce, and death of a family member. These also can make it harder for a child to manage her feelings.

When you are under stress it can be hard to talk about painful things with your child. What most children need is a chance to express their sad and mad feelings. There are a number of books written for children on these difficult situations. You can ask your local librarian for suggestions. Your child care provider can be a great source of support for your child during changes and stressful times. Tell your provider what your child is experiencing, so that she can better understand and respond to your child.

The work of helping your child build self-control continues through the elementary school years and into the teen years. Children learn to be responsible by handling homework, family chores, and obligations to friends and family. Starting early and carrying on self-control lessons throughout your child's developing years is the best way to give the gift of healthy self-control.