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## PARENTING RESOURCE

# Help Your Child Develop Self-Control

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Self-control enables children to cooperate with others, to cope with frustration, and to resolve conflicts. Learn how you can help your infant and child begin to develop this skill that is necessary for success in school and healthy social development.

Self-control means being able to express and cope with strong emotions in appropriate ways—for a toddler, this may mean saying “I’m mad at you” instead of biting. Self-control also involves thinking skills, as we decide which of our impulses to act on. Developing self-control begins at birth and continues across our lives. It is a skill that is critical to children’s school success and overall healthy development. It enables children to cooperate with others, to cope with frustration, and to resolve conflicts. Young children learn these skills through interactions with others and guidance from parents and other caregivers.

Babies are born with virtually no self-control. They have little-to-no ability to control their emotional states or behavior. However, the process of developing self-control begins in a baby’s earliest months and continues across the first three years and beyond:

- A newborn is being changed and doesn’t like it one bit—he is sobbing and screaming. His father says, “Almost done, little man. I know you don’t like this. Hang in there, I’ve just got to get your pants on.” Then the father scoops his son up and holds him until he stops crying. This baby is learning that he can count on loved ones to help him regain control when he is feeling overwhelmed.
- A 9-month-old pulls up on a low table and grabs the television remote. He is happily pushing buttons when his mother gently removes it from his hand and puts it on a bookshelf, while saying, “The remote is not a toy, sweetie. I can’t let you play with it. But how about this instead?” She offers him a “busy box” with lots of buttons to push and doors to open. This baby is learning about appropriate behavior, how to cope with disappointment, and how to accept a substitute when his first choice is off-limits.
- A 2-year-old wants the toy that his friend is playing with. He grabs it; when his friend begins to cry, he slaps his friend and begins to cry himself. His mother calms him and then helps him return the toy to his friend. She explains that hitting is not okay and gives him the words he needs to ask for a turn with the toy. This toddler is learning how to manage and express his strong feelings and impulses; to calm himself, and to make acceptable behavioral choices.

## From Birth to 12 Months

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Babies have very little self-control. They naturally act on thoughts and feelings without the ability to stop themselves. With sensitive guidance from parents and caregivers, they can begin to learn to manage their feelings and actions.

**Help your child to soothe herself.**

The calmer she feels, the more in control she will be. Babies have different ways of calming down. Some need lots of physical contact such as rocking or hugging; others prefer to be swaddled or put down for a minute. You teach your child to calm herself by staying calm yourself when she loses control. This helps her feel safe.

**Teach acceptable behaviors.**

Tell and show your child what he can do, not only what he's not allowed to do. If he's throwing balls around the house, give him an empty trashcan to throw them into or take him outside and show him where and how he can throw the ball. This helps him learn right from wrong and to channel his energy and interests in acceptable ways as he grows.

## 12 to 24 Months

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Toddlers have minds of their own and strong feelings that they express with gusto. "No!" becomes a favorite word and a powerful way to assert their independence. At the same time, toddlers can become easily frustrated because there are still many things that they want to do but cannot. Routines are especially helpful now as they make children feel secure at a time when they can feel very out of control.

**Give your child opportunities to choose.**

Giving children, even young toddlers, opportunities to choose lets them know you trust them to make good decisions. It also helps them feel in control. Let your child make decisions about what to play, what to read, or what to have for snack (give him two healthy snacks to choose from).

**Label and recognize your child's feelings.**

Letting children know their feelings are understood helps them calm down and regain control. This doesn't mean you give in to their demand. "I know you are mad that you have to go to bed, but hitting me is not okay. You can hit this pillow; or we can read this book together instead." Naming and recognizing his feelings helps your child learn to manage his emotions, a important skill necessary for later school success.

## 24 to 36 Months

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Older toddlers are still unable to stop themselves from acting on their desires. Again, recognizing their feelings and suggesting other ways they can express themselves is still the best response at this age. As they grow, encourage them to think about what else they can do—throw the balls into the laundry basket instead of at the wall. The ability to substitute an acceptable action for one that is not acceptable is essential for functioning well in school.

**Give your child opportunities to choose.**

Present him with two acceptable options and let her choose, "Would you like to brush your teeth or put on your pajamas first?" Rather than telling her to get her rain boots, help her think it through on her own: "It is raining out. What will you need to bring to child care today so you can go on a rain-walk with your class?" If a decision is really yours, don't offer a choice. Say, "It's bed time," not "Are you ready to go to bed?"

**Help your child learn to wait.**

Waiting helps children learn self-control. And it teaches them that others have needs, too. Make the wait-time short and give your child something to do in the meantime. Also, playing with friends offers many opportunities to help your child learn to wait, to share, and to take-turns. With your guidance and lots of practice, your child will be well equipped to work out conflicts with his school pals later on.

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