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Help Children Develop Self-Control

Self-control, also known as impulse control, is the ability to suppress the urge to do or say something. It means comprehending consequences of behavior. Adults, who themselves may have difficulty with some aspects of impulse control, often expect children to have better control over their emotions and actions. Research and experience teach that children are developmentally driven to perform certain activities, including testing limits. As a rule, children, especially young children, do not consciously plot to make parents angry or upset. They simply do not have mature impulse control.

What does this mean? Parents need to help children develop impulse control and in some cases, be the impulse control. How? Research has clearly proven that responding promptly to an infant's needs decreases future crying and anxiety. So learn what those cries mean—"I'm hungry, I'm tired, I'm lonely." Verbalize what you're doing. "I'm going to leave the room, but I'll come back through that door." While infants may not initially understand the words, they will certainly respond to nurturing facial expressions and tone of voice. Additionally, a regular routine and schedule help babies develop feelings of security and attachment, which will aid in later development of self-control skills.

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Music and movement can be tools in helping older children develop impulse control. Songs, such as John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt, give children practice in controlling the volume of their voices. Songs that entail omitting of words or letters, such as B I N G O, require children to “speak” in their minds.

Frequent intervals of physical activity can often benefit children who are very active and have trouble controlling their body in relation to others. These children may frequently hit or trip their siblings or friends. Offer help, as in “What can I do to help you control your hands (or feet)?” Aid children in developing a sense of where their own bodies start and stop by having them dance and use different arm and leg motions. The Hokey Pokey is a good game for this.

Other impulse control games are Red Light, Green Light, Mother May I and Simon Says. While entertaining and fun, these activities require children to think about their actions and to control their movements.

Keep transitions to a minimum. Children can feel like their world is spinning out of control when they don't know what to expect from one minute to the next, or when they are in many different environments during the day. Parents also tend to expect an immediate response from children. Instead of allowing space for adjustment, we often want instant movement as in, “Get your coat on right now. We need to go to the store.” Even adults like and need some time to modify activities and thinking.

Parents need to provide reasonable consequences for inappropriate impulse control in a consistent, loving and firm manner. They also need to provide supervision and environmental controls so that children are not placed in situations where lack of impulse control could impact health and/or safety.

Build on your children's strengths by implementing some of the suggested activities. They will begin to develop the ability to control themselves and their impulses.

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