

Self-Discipline and Impulse Control

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Our goal for discipline, in the long-run, is to make ourselves obsolete. Our children need to learn to discipline themselves... We don't want a child who only behaves well because we praise them for it. Or one who only avoids misbehavior if they think they might get caught and punished. Or one who has no sense of what is good and what is bad unless we're standing there interpreting the situation.

We want to raise adults who are capable of controlling their impulsive behavior, capable of working hard for a delayed reward (or even no reward other than their satisfaction with a job well done), and who have such a strong internal sense of right and wrong that it guides their every action, and who do what's right simply because they can't imagine behaving differently.

Impulse Control and Simple Ways to Teach It

To succeed in school and life, kids need to be capable of: sitting still when they want to move, being quiet when they feel like talking, not letting other kid's misbehavior lead them astray, and so on.

Lots of childhood games and parenting methods are all about teaching this. Try these:

- Sing the "Clean Up Song". Stopping playing and cleaning up takes a lot of self-control.
- Sing songs like "You shake and you shake and you stop." Play stop-moving-while-still-playing games like "Red Light, Green Light" or "Musical Chairs" or "Freeze Tag".
- "Simon Says." It's hard to hold still when someone says "touch your nose" and touches theirs!
- Play imagination games like "pretend you're a castle guard – how long can you stand still?"
- Use "Emotion Coaching" to help acknowledge that although it's always OK to have feelings, it's not always OK to act on them. Help them learn ways to manage and express their feelings.

Delayed Gratification and Simple Ways to Teach It

Some day your child will be an adult who needs to do their job every day, even when they don't feel like it, so that at the end of the month they get a paycheck and can pay their bills and then purchase some treat they want. What will help them handle that well? If you practice delayed gratification now.

- Make them wait. When they ask for something, don't always get it immediately. Acknowledge the request, and tell them when you'll do it. "When I'm done washing dishes, I'll get the toy."
- Encourage children to take turns, wait in line, and share. Toddlers and preschoolers struggle with these things, but we start laying the foundation early so they get it as they get older.
- Let them get bored. Don't feel like you have to entertain your child continuously. Sometimes their greatest learning happens when they have to get creative to ward off boredom.
- Teaching manners also helps. When they drop something on the floor, and scream for it, say "Ask me nicely, and I will pick that up for you." And then mosey your way over to do that.
- Offer rewards they need to work for. "If you put away your toys, I'll read 2 books at naptime."
- Be a consistent and reliable parent. If your child can trust that you fulfill your promises, they will be much more willing to wait.

Right vs. Wrong and How We Teach It

As our children go out in the world, they will continuously encounter new situations, with new ethical dilemmas. We won't be there to interpret all of these situations for them, so we want them to have their own sense of right and wrong. How do we teach that?

- We continuously model how we would like them to act. (Note: we all have times when we role model behavior we *don't* want them to do - yell, swear, etc. – if you do, comment on and apologize for your bad behavior. Don't just hope they don't notice, because they do!)
- We talk about our values. When we read books, or watch TV, or see people out in public, we can make observations about the behavior we like. (It's tempting to criticize bad behavior, but it is more effective to tell them what TO DO, rather than what not to do.)
- We praise them when they "do the right thing", especially in situations where that's hard. (Like sharing a favorite toy, or apologizing for upsetting someone.)

To Intervene or Not to Intervene

One question parents often face is how much to intervene. If children are battling over toys, or pushing to see who gets the next turn on the slide, or threatening to hit, when do we step in? The answer varies a lot by culture. Christine Gross-Loh, in Parenting without Borders, tells about her experience watching kids on the playground in Japan. What she was used to, from American playgrounds, was that parents would quickly step in and referee conflicts between children. In Japan, parents did not intervene. They let the children work it out. They viewed playground battles, the crying that results, and making up as normal and natural ways for children to learn how to get along with others. What impact does that have as children get older? One researcher looked at Japanese and American 10 year olds. When asked why they should not hit others or be mean to them, American children said it was because you don't want to get in trouble with a teacher or parent. Japanese children said you shouldn't hurt others because it's wrong and would hurt their feelings.

Wait for It – The Developmental Timeline of Self-Regulation

Self-discipline is a long time in coming. Don't expect much of it in the early years! Our toddlers have a very hard time controlling their impulses, and rely on us almost completely for guidance. Pre-schoolers are better at self-control. And elementary aged kids are even better.

But, to be honest, we need to expect even our 17 and 18 year olds will still have regular lapses in judgment and moments of rash action. That's because their prefrontal cortex (the part of their brain that is responsible for planning, impulse control, and making complex judgments) is still developing. They often make decisions in the moment based on their limbic system (the part of the brain which processes emotion). Anger, fear, excitement, peer pressure and sexual attraction can inspire adolescents (especially boys) to do things faster than the prefrontal cortex can slam on the brakes.

When they make their inevitable poor decisions, you'll be glad you've got 17 or 18 years' worth of practice at positive discipline and that you have already built a strong relationship which is based on trust and respect, but where they also understand you're still the "boss" of them.

Scaffolding

We can't expect our toddlers to have self-discipline. We hope our teenagers will. How do they get there? Through "scaffolding" – in their early years we intervene a lot and give lots of clear explicit guidance, but the older they get, the more we hang back, the more we wait for them to find their own solutions, the more we help them reflect on their responses and what they could have done differently. As we fade back, they take on more responsibility for their actions, and live more with the consequences that result. (They may need emotional support when those consequences are upsetting. But we can't over-protect them from their mistakes if we want them to learn.) We are always there for support, and advice, but leave them to make more of the decisions on their own.

Sources: Self-Regulation: <https://www.parentingcounts.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/information-for-parents-self-regulation.pdf>