

DISCIPLINE AND SELF-CONTROL

Self-control is the ability to make decisions about how and when we express our feelings, and upon which of our impulses to act. This is a life-long process that is critical to the healthy development of children (and adults)! Strategies parents and caregivers use to help children develop self-control will largely depend on the age and developmental stage of the child.

Let's look at a variety of approaches parents and caregivers can take to help their children learn acceptable ways to express their feelings and desires, to reduce unacceptable behaviors, and to develop self-control.

Help your child regain control.

- When your child loses control, stay calm. This will help him feel safe. It is also an opportunity for you to model self-control.
- Figure out how your child is best soothed. This will help you to help him regain control. Some children need lots of physical contact, such as firm touch and hugging. Others can be easily diverted by engaging them in an activity or interaction with you. Still others need time to blow off steam in a safe, quiet place and can then eventually re-group on their own.

Understand why your child lost control. If you can identify specific stressors, it will help you anticipate times that may be more stressful to your child. Is there a particular time of day or typical experience that precipitates a “fall out” or “breakdown”? With this awareness, you can alter the environment or your daily routine to minimize the negative impact. For example:

- If you know your child doesn't like noisy, crowded places, and often has tantrums or breakdowns in these environments, you could help him adjust by taking small steps to help him feel more comfortable and in control. For example, when entering a playroom or playground, stay on the sidelines and watch for a while. Talk about what kids are doing. See if your child seems interested in something in particular. Help him find a few toys or a piece of equipment with which he is familiar and feels confident. Then help him join with one or two other children until he can comfortably interact with the group.

Also be aware of your child's daily rhythms and basic needs. It is difficult for children to display self-control if they're tired, hungry, sick or stressed.

Think of misbehavior as an opportunity for learning. When your child misbehaves, he is not doing it to purposefully “get you”— although it may feel that way sometimes! He is trying to learn about his world and how different behaviors and actions lead to different consequences.

Your responses to your child's actions are critical, as they help him to determine whether his behavior is worth repeating. The more emotional your response, the more likely the behavior will continue, because an intense reaction, positive or negative, is gratifying and reason enough to repeat the behavior.

So when your child misbehaves, consider it an opportunity to teach your child what is and is not acceptable, rather than a time for punishment. If your child consistently throws the blocks and you take them away, he will learn that this behavior leads to undesirable consequences and he will likely stop. Then, when you clap and smile as he builds a tower, he will learn that this is acceptable and rewarding.

DISCIPLINE

Handout #2

SCENARIO: TRISHA AND MARCUS

Unresolved Scenario

Marcus, a very mobile 11-month-old, loves pushing buttons. His new favorite activity is turning the TV on and off. His mother, Trisha, has told him dozens of times to stop. When she tells him "NO!", he always looks up, acknowledging her command. Sometimes he stops, other times he continues. Trisha has begun to put him in his crib as punishment when he doesn't listen to her.

To think about...

- How do you think Trisha is feeling? How might you be feeling if you were in Trisha's position?
- How do you think Trisha is interpreting Marcus' behavior? How does this interpretation influence her response?
- What do you think is the meaning of Marcus' behavior? What do you think he is learning from Trisha's response?

Scenario Concluded

Despite being put in the crib several times, Marcus continues to turn the TV on and off. Trisha sees that her strategy is not working and is beginning to feel that Marcus is just "bad." She talks to a friend who has a 2-year-old about this problem. Her friend tells her that she went through a similar phase with her own child, and that she didn't learn until later that this behavior is normal for a baby. Babies are not able to control their behavior at this age, and what Marcus is doing is simply exploring and experimenting. With this new knowledge, Trisha feels very relieved that she is not a bad mother and that her son is not "bad." The next time Marcus turns the TV on and off, Trisha gently steers him away and gives him a toy that has buttons on it.

To think about ...

- How do you think Trisha's feeling that she was a bad mother might have influenced her initial response to Marcus?
- How do you think that Trisha's new thinking and strategy might make an impact on Marcus?
- How does this scenario apply to experiences that you have had with your child? What might you have done differently in this situation?

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Handout #3

SCENARIO: BRIAN AND TIFFANY

Unresolved Scenario

21-month-old Tiffany is deliberately spilling her juice all over the high chair. Her dad, Brian, tells her repeatedly to stop this, but she continues. As his anger increases, he takes the cup away and abruptly lifts Tiffany out of the high chair. Tiffany begins to sob.

To think about...

- How do you think Tiffany is feeling? Brian?
- What do you think Tiffany is learning from this experience?
- What might you have done differently in this situation?

Scenario Concluded

Brian hesitates, feeling like this was not a useful response. He remembers that Mom had bought spill-proof cups for just this reason and decides he will use those next time he's in charge of dinner. With the heat of the moment over, he also realizes that Tiffany may not have been purposely trying to drive him crazy. Perhaps she is interested in experimenting with liquids to see what they do. He takes Tiffany outside and gives her some plastic bowls filled with water and spoons and lets her experiment freely. Brian feels quite rewarded as he watches Tiffany delight in her new discoveries.

To think about

- What do you think Brian learned from this interaction? What did it take for Brian to change his approach?
- What effect did Brian's change in approach have on Tiffany?
- How might you have reacted in this situation? What might you have done differently?

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Handout #4

SCENARIO: ANGIE AND TIMMY

Unresolved Scenario

Timmy, 4, loves to pretend he is a knight. Today, he has happily discovered a wooden ruler on the floor and is brandishing it as he conquers his imagined enemy. His 7-month-old younger brother, Jason, is playing close-by. His mother, Angie, seeing Timmy with the ruler, angrily tells him to put it down because it is not a toy, and he could hurt Jason. Timmy explains, "But mom, I have to make sure the ogre doesn't hurt the people!" Angie grabs the ruler from Timmy, who bursts into tears, and sends him to his room for a time-out.

To think about ...

- What do you think about Timmy's behavior? What do you think he thought and felt about his mother's reaction?
- What do you think Angie is thinking and feeling?
- Have you found yourself in similar situations? How might you have handled this one?

Scenario Concluded

While Timmy is in his room, Angie starts to think about her reaction. She knows that Timmy is still having a hard time adjusting to having a new little brother and that constantly reprimanding him in order to protect Jason is probably just making Timmy feel worse. She starts to think about alternative ways to deal with this. She goes to talk with Timmy. She explains clearly that he cannot play with the ruler because it is dangerous to Jason and to Timmy. She also tells him that she knows how much he loves to play his knight game and that conquering evil is a very important job. She asks him what else he might use as a sword. Together they brainstorm different, safer objects he can use in the future and finally decide on an empty paper towel tube.

To think about ...

- How do you think Angie's response affected Timmy? What do you think he learned?
- How did this experience help build a strong relationship between Timmy and Angie?
- Can you think of a situation like this that you have confronted?
- What might you have done the same or differently in this situation?

DISCIPLINE

Handout #5

DISCIPLINE: WHAT TO EXPECT, WHAT YOU CAN DO

9-15 Months: Babies are mobile and curious, driven to explore and learn—a powerful combination.

This means they will get into things that are unacceptable to you or dangerous to themselves. *They are not doing this on purpose.*

They also start to test at this age, looking to you to see how you are going to respond. For example, a 10-month-old may approach the first step of the staircase and look up at Mom to see what she will do.

- Childproof your home and create safe places where your baby can explore freely
- Use diversion—when you see your child going for something unacceptable, get him interested in something else.
- Help him explore in safe ways, such as following behind him as he climbs the stairs.

15-24 Months: Toddlers understand and respond to “NO!” by looking up and stopping their behavior in the moment.

However, they do not yet have the ability to *stop themselves* from the behavior. Although they may stop dropping crackers off the high chair when you say, “No!”, they surely will be throwing something else off the high chair the next day as if you had never said a thing. Again, *they are not purposely misbehaving.*

Limit “No’s.” When your child is doing something unacceptable, let her know this is not okay, remove the “stimulus”—for example, the crackers—and offer a *substitution*, an acceptable alternative, such as throwing a small rubber ball over the high chair. You can even try to see if she can get it into a basket. This teaches her what is and is not acceptable and at the same time honors her need to explore and learn—in this case, about gravity.

24-36 Months: During this stage, children are developing better self-control, and are able to understand the consequences of their actions. This means that they can learn to *not do something.*

Children do a lot of testing to see what is acceptable and not acceptable, and need you to help them figure out the difference.

- Stay calm in the face of your child’s “misbehavior.” When you show that you are emotionally upset, you may make your child even more upset. It also makes it harder for you to think clearly and set and enforce appropriate limits, the crucial next step. If your child uses crayons to write on the wall when you have told him not to, remain calm. Take the crayons away for a while. Later, give him a chance to correct his behavior by giving back the crayons and offering him appropriate things to color. This helps him learn acceptable

3-5 Years: Preschoolers are developing a sense of morality that will become more solidified in the next few years. They are forming a conscience, the ability to feel guilt, and a well-developed sense of empathy. While they know what they should and shouldn't do, their desire often overrides their self-control. They know they shouldn't grab the toy, but they still do.

ways to express himself and have his needs met— a key goal of discipline.

- Limit the use of time-outs. Removing the child often increases his frustration and does not teach him acceptable alternatives.

- Make the rules clear and consistent and follow through with natural consequences.
- Explain to the child the consequences of her actions. "Hitting hurts. We don't hurt people with our bodies." Explanations are critical at this age as children understand the *why* of things and it promotes their empathy and moral development.
- Validate the child's feeling, not the behavior. "You are very angry. You don't like it when Tanya won't share."
- Offer an alternative way to express anger, such as calmly using words. Demonstrate with your own tone of voice how to use words without yelling or screaming.
- Engage the child in finding a way to resolve the problem more appropriately. "How can you two share the toy? What are your ideas?" The more children are involved in the solution, the more invested they are in executing it. It also helps them become good problem-solvers. And it teaches empathy: "What does it feel like when someone hits you?...How would you prefer your friend show you he is angry?"

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Handout #6

DISCIPLINE: TRY THIS AT HOME ACTIVITIES

Identifying patterns. Ask parents to write down specific instances in which they set a limit with their child during the next week. Parents should write down what the child did, what the parent did, and the outcome. This will help parents begin to see patterns in their child's behavior that can help them predict situations that may cause conflict. It will also help parents become more aware of what's working, what's not, and perhaps why. For example, "I told Alicia that we would do one more puzzle before bed. When she begged to do two more, and threw a tantrum, I said, 'No,' and didn't give in. I tucked her into bed crying but she stopped a few minutes later and called me in to give me a goodnight kiss."

In the beginning of next week's session, ask parents to share one thing they learned about themselves and their child from doing this exercise.

Trying something new. Ask parents to identify a situation that causes a power struggle or requires setting a limit that they find difficult to handle effectively. When such a situation arises during the next week, they should hold back from responding in their typical way, and try something new. For example, a toddler handles his baby brother too roughly. Mom typically pulls the toddler away and speaks harshly to him. Instead, as soon as her toddler begins to handle the baby, she approaches, tells her toddler how nice it is that he wants to touch and play with his little brother, and then shows him how he can do that safely, before he goes too far.

Also, remind parents of the scenarios in the *Parents and Children Together* section of this chapter which serve as good examples of stopping, reflecting, and then doing something different.

In next week's session, ask parents to share their examples and what they learned about themselves and their child.

DISCIPLINE

Handout #7

LIMIT-SETTING LOG

Child's Behavior	Parental Response	Outcome

DEALING WITH MISBEHAVIOR

Take action. If your child is misbehaving, words alone will most likely not be enough. You will need to take action to help your child stop the behavior. It takes lots of repetition, hearing the words together with the actions, before the words alone are enough.

Validate feelings, not behavior. When your child misbehaves, acknowledge and accept her feelings, but let her know that the behavior, what she *did* when she was angry, was unacceptable. “I know you are really angry, but you cannot throw the blocks.”

Acknowledge your child’s intent/desire. Use words to show that you understand what he wants to do. “You want to play with the water, but you cannot spill it on the table.”

Teach alternatives. Tell and show your child what to do. Offer acceptable ways to channel her energy. If her action is halted, but she is not offered a meaningful or satisfactory substitution, the unacceptable behavior will likely continue. You need to provide the alternative. In the case of spilling water, you can take her outside or in the tub and provide her with acceptable ways to fulfill her desire to explore with water.

Re-direct. Show your child ways to express the same impulses acceptably. “It’s not okay to throw blocks. Someone might get hurt. Let’s throw this foam ball in the basket instead.”

Use logical consequences. If he still throws the blocks: “We have to put the blocks away for awhile. We can try them again later today. Would you like to do a puzzle?” Make sure, however, to give him a chance to try the blocks again soon so he has the opportunity to make a better choice.

Limit the use of time-out. Time-out is most useful when a child is “losing it” and needs to calm down before he can learn from the experience, *but it does not teach correct behavior*. And, while it works for some children, it does not work for all. Most important is for you to know your child and how he is best soothed. Some children benefit from being alone for a few minutes and can regroup on their own. These children should be allowed to end the time-out when they are ready. This will help them learn to gauge their own feelings and behavior and give them a sense of control. However, for other children, time-outs increase their distress and loss of control. These children may benefit more from being held closely, or rocked, as they need this kind of touch and body contact in order to reorganize. This is fine and should not be seen by you or by them as “giving in.” The most important thing is helping your child calm down so he can then be available to learn from the experience.

Give your child age-appropriate opportunities to choose. Giving a child choices helps her feel that she can be in control. Let her make certain decisions about with whom or what to play, what to wear, or how to use art materials. The process of choosing, not the outcome, is what is most important. It's all about self-determination.

Be clear and consistent about rules. If a decision is really yours, don't pretend to give your child a choice. Say, "It's time to go to bed now," not "Are you ready for bed?" Whenever possible, however, do present him with two acceptable alternatives and let him decide. "Do you want to brush your teeth first, or put on your pajamas?"

Help your child learn to wait. Waiting is one of the main ways we ask children to exert self-control. It teaches them that others have needs too. If you ask your child to wait, make it short, and give him something to do in the meantime. "I can help you with the puzzle when I get off the phone. Would you lay out all the pieces while you wait?" Since children do not have a handle on time, for example what "five minutes" means, it will help to provide cues, such as an egg timer, so they can feel more in control of time and know what to expect and when.