

Teaching Your Child Self-Control

The tantrums and outbursts of a child who has no self-control can rile even the most patient of parents.

Whether you're in the middle of a crowded grocery store, at a holiday dinner with extended family, or even at home, these fits can be extremely frustrating. But they may be a little easier to handle if your child learns a sense of self-control, how to make choices about how to respond to a situation, instead of just relying on impulses.

By exercising self-control, your child can learn to make appropriate decisions and respond to stressful situations in ways that will be more likely to have positive outcomes.

For example, if you tell your child that you are not going to serve ice cream until after dinner, your child may cry, plead, or even scream in the hopes that you will give in. If your child has a sense of self-control, he or she might understand that a temper tantrum may cause you to take away the ice cream for good. And your child may be more willing to wait patiently for ice cream after dinner.

How Can You Help Your Child Learn Self-Control?

Here are a few suggestions on how you can help your child learn to control his or her behavior:

- **birth to age 2:** Infants and toddlers frequently get frustrated because there's a large gap between the things they want to do and what they are actually able to do. They often respond to those frustrations with temper tantrums. You may be able to prevent your child from having an outburst by distracting him or her with toys or other activities. By the time your child is 2 years old, you may want to use a brief time-out (when your child is taken to a designated time-out area - a kitchen chair or bottom stair - for a minute or 2 to calm down) to show that there are consequences for outbursts. Time-outs can also teach your child that it's best to take some time alone in the face of frustration, instead of throwing a temper tantrum.
- **ages 3 to 5:** At this stage, you may want to continue to use time-outs. But rather than sticking to a specific time limit, it's a good idea to end time-outs as soon as your child has calmed down. This can be an effective way to encourage your child to improve his or her sense of self-control. It's also a good idea to praise your child for not losing control in situations that are frustrating or difficult.
- **ages 6 to 9:** As your child enters school, he or she will likely be able to understand the idea of consequences and that he or she can choose good or bad behavior. It may help your child to imagine a stop sign that he or she needs to obey and think about a situation before responding. You may want to encourage your child to walk away from a frustrating situation for a few minutes to cool off instead of having an outburst.
- **ages 10 to 12:** Older children are typically able to better understand their feelings. Encourage your child to think about the situation that is causing him or her to lose control and then analyze it. You may want to explain to your child that sometimes the situations that are upsetting at first don't end up being as awful as they first seem. You may want to urge your child to take some time to think before responding to a situation.
- **ages 13 to 17:** At this point, your child should be able to control most of his or her actions. But you may need to remind your teen to think about long-term consequences of his or her actions. Continue to urge your teen to take time to evaluate upsetting situations before responding to them. Also encourage your child to talk through troubling situations rather than losing control, slamming doors, or yelling. At this point you may need to discipline your child by taking away certain privileges, for example, to reinforce the message that self-control is an important skill.

What to Do When Your Child Is Out of Control

It's important to set a good example for your child by demonstrating healthy ways to react to stressful situations. As difficult as it may be, it's a good idea to resist the urge to yell when you are disciplining your child. Instead, try to be firm and matter of fact. If your child is losing his or her temper, instead of losing yours, too, calmly let your child know that yelling, throwing a tantrum, and slamming doors is unacceptable behavior, and it has consequences. Calmly explain what those consequences are.

If your child has an occasional temper tantrum or outburst, in many cases, it's a good idea to show your child that a tantrum is not an effective method to get what he or she wants. For example, if your child gets upset at the grocery store after you've explained why you are not buying any candy, if you don't give in to it, you have demonstrated that a tantrum is unacceptable behavior, and it doesn't work.

If your child frequently loses control and is continually argumentative, antisocial, or impulsive or if tantrums last for more than 10 minutes on a regular basis, you may want to talk to your child's doctor.

For school-age children, you may want to also talk to the doctor if the tantrums are accompanied by the following behaviors:

- restlessness
- impulsiveness
- defiance
- difficulty in concentrating
- low self-esteem
- declining performance in school

You might also consider talking to your child's teachers about classroom settings and appropriate behavioral expectations for your child. Also, look at your own actions to see if you are managing stressful situations as well as you can. If not, you might want to ask your family doctor about whether family counseling sessions may help.

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