

# Teaching Your Child Self-Control

When kids melt down in the middle of a crowded store, at a holiday dinner with extended family, or at home, it can be extremely frustrating. But parents can help kids learn self-control and teach them how to respond to situations without just acting on impulse.

Teaching self-control skills is one of the most important things that parents can do for their kids because these are some of the most important skills for success later in life.

## Helping Kids Learn Self-Control

By learning self-control, kids can make appropriate decisions and respond to stressful situations in ways that can yield positive outcomes.

For example, if you say that you're not serving ice cream until after dinner, your child may cry, plead, or even scream in the hopes that you will give in. But with self-control, your child can understand that a temper tantrum means you'll take away the ice cream for good and that it's wiser to wait patiently.

Here are a few suggestions on how to help kids learn to control their behavior:

### Up to Age 2

Infants and toddlers get frustrated by the large gap between the things they want to do and what they're able to do. They often respond with temper tantrums. Try to prevent outbursts by distracting your little one with toys or other activities. For kids reaching the 2-year-old mark, try a brief timeout in a designated area — like a kitchen chair or bottom stair — to show the consequences for outbursts and teach that it's better to take some time alone instead of throwing a tantrum.

### Ages 3 to 5

You can continue to use timeouts, but rather than enforcing a specific time limit, end timeouts once your child has calmed down. This helps kids improve their sense of self-control. And praise your child for not losing control in frustrating or difficult situations.

### Ages 6 to 9

As kids enter school, they're better able to understand the idea of consequences and that they can choose good or bad behavior. It may help your child to imagine a stop sign that must be

obeyed and think about a situation before responding. 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 kids usually better understand their feelings. Encourage them to think about what's causing them to lose control and then analyze it. Explain that sometimes the situations that are upsetting at first don't end up being so awful. Urge kids to take time to think before responding to a situation.

## **Ages 13 to 17**

By now kids should be able to control most of their actions. But remind teens to think about long-term consequences. Urge them to pause to evaluate upsetting situations before responding and talk through problems rather than losing control, slamming doors, or yelling. If necessary, discipline your teen by taking away certain privileges to reinforce the message that self-control is an important skill.

## **When Kids Are Out of Control**

As difficult as it may be, resist the urge to yell when you're disciplining your kids. Instead, be firm and matter of fact. During a child's meltdown, stay calm and explain that yelling, throwing a tantrum, and slamming doors are unacceptable behaviors that have consequences — and say what those consequences are.

Your actions will show that tantrums won't get kids the upper hand. For example, if your child gets upset in the grocery store after you've explained why you won't buy candy, don't give in — thus demonstrating that the tantrum was both unacceptable and ineffective.

Also, consider speaking to your child's teachers about classroom settings and appropriate behavioral expectations. Ask if problem solving is taught or demonstrated in school.

And model good self-control yourself. If you're in an irritating situation and your kids are present, tell them why you're frustrated and then discuss the potential solutions to the problem. For example, if you've misplaced your keys, instead of getting upset, tell your kids the keys are missing and then search for them together. If they don't turn up, take the next constructive step (like retracing your steps when you last had the keys in-hand). Show that good emotional control and problem solving are the ways to deal with a difficult situation.

If you continue to have difficulties, ask your doctor if family counseling sessions might help.