

Helping Your Child Develop Self-Control

Self-control is the ability to recognize, express, and cope with strong emotions in ways that are appropriate and acceptable. Developing self-control begins at birth and continues throughout childhood. It is a skill that is critical to children's school success and overall healthy development. It allows children to cooperate with others, to cope with frustration, and to resolve conflicts. Young children learn these skills through interactions with others and guidance from parents and other caregivers. The process of developing self-control starts very early, for example, when babies stop crying and learn to wait when they hear a parent coming down the hallway to get them after their nap. Children continue working on self-control skills for most of their childhood, and through the teen years—which may come as no surprise to the parents of adolescents!

Toddlers have minds of their own and strong feelings that they express with gusto. *No!* becomes a favourite word and a powerful way to assert their independence. At the same time, toddlers can become easily frustrated because there are still many things that they want to do but can't. Routines are especially helpful as they make children feel secure at a time when they can feel very out of control.

Even older toddlers are unable to stop themselves from acting on their desires. The following are strategies that can help them develop self-control:

- **Give your child opportunities to choose.** This lets her know you value how she thinks about the world and that you trust her to make good decisions. It also gives her a sense of control. Let your child make choices about things like what to play, what to read, or what to have for snack (among two or three healthy snacks you offer). Remember, if a decision is really yours, don't offer a choice. Say, *It's bed time*, not *Are you ready for bed?* Or, if you really care that her pants and shirt match, offer two shirt choices that both match.
- **Limit the number of choices.** Too many choices can be overwhelming for a toddler: *Do you want cereal or toast for breakfast?*
- **Label and recognize your child's feelings.** Letting children know their feelings are understood helps them calm down and regain control. This doesn't mean you give in to their demands. *I know you are mad that I turned the TV off. It's okay to be mad but you can't hit me. You can tell me with your words how mad you are or stomp your feet to show your anger. When you calm down, we can read this book.* Naming and recognizing his feelings helps your child learn to manage his emotions.
- **Use short sentences when your child is very upset.** When your toddler is having difficulty making a decision or managing her feelings, limit the number of words you use. Too many words can be overwhelming for your toddler and make it harder for her to calm down.
- **Help your child learn to wait.** Waiting helps children learn self-control. It also teaches them that others have needs, too. Make the wait-time short and give your child something to do in the meantime. Also, playing with friends offers many opportunities to help your child learn to wait, share, and take-turns. With your guidance and lots of practice, your child will be well equipped to work out conflicts with his school pals later on.
- **Play turn-taking and listening games.** Any game that involves taking turns, whether it is rolling a ball back and forth, racing toy trucks, or feeding a babydoll, helps children develop self-control as they learn to wait for their turn to participate. Listening games, like simple versions of *Simon Says* or *Red Light, Green Light*, also help your child listen and follow rules—part of mastering self-control.