

Teaching Young Children Self-Control Skills: Information for Parents and Educators



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The National Association of School Psychologists

Self-control is an important skill for all children to learn. It refers to having power or control over one's own actions. It also means that an individual knows right from wrong. Children who do not make choices for their own behavior, but instead rely on other children, parents, teachers, or adults to make choices for them, do not learn self-control. These children may follow others' bad choices and get involved in ridiculing others, taking away others' things, and not taking responsibility for the consequences of their behavior. They also may listen to others who say negative things about people who may be different due to skin color, race, culture, religion, or disabilities. The skill of self-control will allow children to know that the right thing to do is to be tolerant of others despite differences. If students are taught self-control at an early age, then they will feel better about the choices that they do make.

General Strategies to Teach Self-Control

It is important to select age-appropriate goals for children who are learning self-control. Try simple goals first, where success is expected, one goal at a time. For preschool children, appropriate goals might include not interrupting or not fighting with siblings. For early elementary school children, appropriate goals might include complying with bedtime rules or showing anger appropriately (instead of hitting or screaming). Some general strategies that often help children learn appropriate self-control behaviors include:

- **Take a break:** Encourage children to “take a break” or a “time out” from a situation where they are feeling angry or upset.
- **Teach and provide attention:** Children can learn to resist interrupting others by learning how to observe when others are not talking, so that they can join in appropriately. Be sure to provide children with attention at appropriate times so that they are not “starved” for attention and more likely to interrupt inappropriately.
- **Use appropriate rewards:** Children need consistent, positive feedback to learn appropriate behavior. Praise and attention are highly rewarding for young children, as is special time with a parent. Be sure your child knows what behavior is desired!
- **Use specific activities designed to teach self-regulation:** Parents can help teach even young children (ages 5–8 years) the skills that foster self-control, using activities such as those that follow. These skills include dealing with “wanting something I can't have,” understanding feelings, and controlling anger. Below, each skill is described, followed by activities to teach and practice self-control skills. Each activity includes a set of problem solving steps to teach and rehearse with young children, along with suggestions for “role playing” (acting out situations) and discussion.

Skill: Dealing With Wanting Something I Can't Have

Often, young children are easily upset when their needs or wishes are not met immediately. Almost daily, children encounter many objects, toys, and activities that are attractive to them. Many times children do not know how to handle their frustration when told “no” or “later” by a caregiver. Also, there are times when young children do not understand that one child may or may not be allowed to do something because of their family's religious beliefs or cultural background. In order to have positive experiences at home, in school, and in the community, children need to learn skills to appropriately handle their feelings associated with wanting something that they cannot have. These skills will increase children's self-control and tolerance of others.

Teach children to use the following steps (see puppet activity below):

1. SAY, “I would like to (have) _____ but I can't right now.”
2. THINK about your choices:
 - Ask again later.
 - Find something else to do.
 - Ask to borrow it (if feasible).
 - Ask to share it.
 - Ask to do chores to earn money to buy one.
 - Wait your turn.
 - Accept that you are not allowed and say “I would like it, but that's ok.”
3. ACT out your best choice.

Puppet Role Playing Activity

This activity helps young children learn how to identify one thing that they want and cannot have. They will talk about the feelings associated with not being able to have something they want. And, the children will review the possible choices of how to deal with wanting something that is not theirs.

Materials needed: Paper, crayons or markers, puppets

Directions:

1. Have your child write or draw about a thing or activity he wishes he had or could do.
2. Have a conversation with your child about what she wishes or wants and why.
3. Tell your child about something you wish you could have or do, and why.
4. Use puppets to play different roles in the following pretend situations:
 - Your friend has one of the new action figures (e.g., Pokemon, G.I. Joe) that you have been wishing to have for weeks.
 - You want to play with your friend, but he has to go somewhere with his family all day.
 - A girl in your class who uses a wheelchair has a computer with a game you love to play.
 - Your brother just got a great bat and baseball for his birthday ... just like the one you want.

Ideas for discussion during role playing: Use these questions to help your child think about appropriate choices and behaviors in the role plays above:

- How do you feel when you see that another child has what you would like to have?
- How would it feel if someone took one of your toys or things without your permission?
- What can we do when we want to have someone else's things? What are our choices?
- What can we do when someone else is getting to do something we want to do? What are our choices?

Skill: Knowing Your Feelings

In order for children to gain control of their behavior when they are experiencing strong feelings, they must know how to identify their feelings. It is never too early to talk to children about feelings or to help them see the link between feelings and behavior. Linking these together demonstrates how our feelings can affect the choices we make, and it can also improve children's self-control.

Teach children these steps for problem solving:

1. THINK about what happened.
2. THINK of how your body feels. (It will be necessary to review several basic feeling words with young children to help them identify some ways our body tells us how we are feeling. Help the children notice that some body cues signal different feelings.)
3. RECOGNIZE the feeling.
4. SAY, "I feel _____."

Identifying Feelings Activity: Young children can learn a variety of words to use to describe different feelings.

Directions:

1. Tell your child that you want to talk about feelings and how we can get messages from the way our body behaves. These messages tell us how we feel about experiences. (e.g., If you win a game you might smile and laugh. If someone says something mean you might cry.)
2. Ask your child to provide examples of his own feelings. "Can you tell me about a time you felt happy? Sad? Angry?" (Limit examples to three or four.)
3. Next, ask your child to name as many feelings as she can, and to decide if each is a comfortable (e.g., happy, excited, joyful, proud) or an uncomfortable (e.g., angry, sad, embarrassed) feeling. You can use a chalkboard or paper to list feelings in two columns.
4. Ask, "How do you show you are happy, sad, angry, scared, etc.?"
5. Use the following situations to act out with your child (you can use puppets as above):
 - Your class is going to receive an extra recess because they did a great job on their spelling test! [artwork, music, reading, etc.]
 - You made a drawing and your older brother (sister) tells you that "you can't draw."
 - You just heard a friend say that anyone wearing a blue shirt is "stupid."

Ideas for discussion during role playing: Use these questions to help your child think about appropriate choices and behaviors in the role plays above:

- When you have comfortable feelings, how might you show them to other people? (e.g., smile, laugh, hug, act friendly)
- How do you think other people feel when we show our comfortable feelings?

FEELING	HAPPY	SAD	ANGRY	SCARED
Body Cues	Smile	Frown	Red face	Big, open eyes
	Laugh	Cry	Frown	Stand still
	Calm breathing	Crossed arms	Tense muscles	Heart beats fast
	Relaxed muscles	Move slowly	Fast breathing	Quiet
				Red face

- When you have uncomfortable feelings, how might you show them to other people? (e.g., yell, frown, blush, cry)
- How do you think other people feel when we show our uncomfortable feelings?
- How do you think expressing our feelings might help us get along better with one another? (e.g., understand each other and our differences, communicate better, resolve conflicts better, and share in each other's excitement more frequently.)

Another activity: Using familiar short stories, ask your child to draw pictures that illustrate how the main characters feel. Select stories that include a variety of feelings.

Skill: Dealing With Feeling Mad

Feeling angry is a natural reaction to some of the experiences we encounter in everyday life. Teaching children how to effectively manage this emotion at an early age will improve their individual ability to cope and can improve tolerance. At a time when school and community violence appears to be on the rise, teaching children to effectively manage their anger and choose prosocial actions to resolve problems is an important task for teachers and parents.

Teach children these steps for problem solving:

1. RECOGNIZE you are feeling angry (face is red, hands are clenched, possibly beginning to cry)
2. COUNT to 10.
3. THINK about your choices:
 - Walk away for now.
 - Relax and take some deep breaths.
 - Tell the person in nice words using an inside/calm voice why you are angry.
4. ACT out your best choice.

Good Choice/Bad Choice Activity: Young children can learn to understand how to identify their choices when they are in potentially anger-provoking situations, and they will begin to learn independent prosocial decision making skills. This activity requires paper (like butcher paper or poster board) and markers or crayons.

Directions:

1. Tell your child that he is going to have to practice very good listening skills, because he will have to decide "what would you do?"
2. Make two columns on the paper, one titled "Good Choices" and the other "Bad Choices"
3. Read the first scenario provided in the list below and ask the child to think of several actions she has seen or taken in response to similar situations. Then ask the child to decide whether this action was a good choice or bad choice. (It may be necessary to prompt him to identify if it was a bad or a good choice using questions such as, "What did the person's face do? What did the person's body do? How do you think the person felt? How could you tell? What happened?")
4. At the end, place a big "X" over the bad choice column, and transfer the "good choice" answers onto another sheet of poster/butcher paper that can be hung up as a

reminder in an appropriate location (child's bedroom, den, etc.). Encourage your child to draw illustrations on the poster.

Sample situations:

- A neighbor child calls you a name that you don't like.
- Your friend broke your new toy that you got for your birthday.
- Your mom won't let you go to the movies with your friend's family.

Resources

Clark, L. (1996). SOS! Help for parents (2nd edition). Parents Press.

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