

# Parenting Together

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## Helping Children to Learn Self-Control

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



**"Wait your turn."  
"Keep your hands to yourself."  
"Ask nicely."**

Whether we realize it or not, many of the instructions we give our children are about self-control. Self-control means being able to resist immediate temptations and avoid acting on impulse in order to achieve more important goals, such as learning or being kind. When children have stronger self-control, they do better in school and get along better with others. By learning self-control, children can make appropriate decisions and respond to stressful situations in ways that result in more positive outcomes. Self-control doesn't have to mean effortful, teeth-gritting willpower. In fact, that kind of self-restraint is hard to keep up for long—even for adults.

### What often works best is helping children learn and use effective strategies for boosting self-control.

Dr. Angela Duckworth, a professor and developmental psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, says there are three main strategies that children can use to make self-control easier to manage.

#### 1. Change the Situation

One of the simplest and often most effective strategies for self-control is changing the situation to reduce temptation. This is a very powerful self-control strategy because it involves minimal effort. For example, if you are trying to avoid sweets, not having sweets in the house makes it easier to eat healthy foods.

Teaching children this strategy involves helping them think about and choose circumstances that encourage good behavior.

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**For young children, this could mean sitting on the opposite end of the couch so they won't be tempted to poke a sibling, or having fewer toys out so clean-up feels more manageable.**

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**For school-age children, this could mean putting away electronic distractions during homework time, setting a timer to get a task done quickly, or figuring out whether they do their homework most efficiently in their bedroom or at the kitchen table.**



## 2. Change Their Thinking

This strategy involves addressing what children pay attention to and also how they interpret situations. Planning and perspective can help in guiding children toward making better choices.

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**For young children, creating a visual reminder with pictures of their morning routine can help them remember what they need to do next. Also, have them repeat instructions or answer a question such as "what do we need to remember about how to behave at the store?" Doing this before entering the situation can help children stay focused.**

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**For older children, asking problem-solving questions such as "What would be a fair solution?", "What can you do to help her feel better?", or "How can we prevent this problem?" can encourage thinking that leads to self-control.**



## 3. Change Their Response

Coping when they find themselves in a frustrating, scary, upsetting, or exciting situation tends to be the most difficult type of self-control. In these heated situations, it is easy for children to lash out, burst into tears, or refuse to cooperate. Having a plan that spells out what to do instead can help them hold onto self-control. Using role-play can help your child practice the plan before it is needed.

### GAME TIME!

**Try this fun game to help children learn self-control and get some of those wiggles out!**

### ***FREEZE DANCE***

Have a dance party with a group of children and/or family members and tell everyone that when you stop the music, they must hold very still. Try doing the opposite too - Dance to silence and freeze when the music starts!

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**Young children who tend to hit when they get upset may find it useful to cross their arms and give themselves a little hug when they feel angry. Knowing how and whom to ask for help when they need it is also essential.**

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**School-age children need to know how to handle any teasing they may encounter. Having practiced responses such as "I don't mind?" or "That's not who I am" can help them feel better equipped to deal with teasing without becoming upset or emotional.**

*For more age-specific ideas, check out this article: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/self-control.html>*

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## References

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