

Self-control is sometimes described as the ability to limit one's impulses in the absence of an authority figure. It is often related to one's developing sense of ethics and values.

For example: A 10-year-old child is in a store and sees a pack of gum. They want that pack of gum, but don't have any money to buy it. There is no parent and no other authority figure present. Do they take that pack of gum, or resist? Resisting shows both self-control and a value system (stealing is wrong). The value system aids in exercising the impulse control. The impulse control allows the child to reflect on values.

Self-control is about having power over impulses and knowing right from wrong.

Another example: Your 7-year-old son Tommy is playing a board game with you. He is losing the game. After rolling the dice and receiving another setback, Tommy either:

1. Yells out in frustration, sweeps all the playing pieces on the ground, throws the dice at his sister, and stomps off.
2. Lets out a sigh of frustration, then he shrugs and says, "I hate losing! I want a rematch--can we play again?"

In the first scenario, Tommy is unable to control his emotions, and has probably been unaware throughout the game of a growing sense of frustration. He doesn't know how to cope with the feeling of disappointment and stress of losing, so he strikes out in anger. His feelings are so overpowering he is unable to call upon an inner sense of right and wrong to help control his behavior.

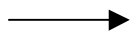
In the second scenario, Tommy has the same frustration and disappointed feelings over losing. However, he is able to control those emotions, and instead of acting out in anger, he expresses his feelings verbally (and appropriately), shrugs and asks for a rematch.

This example shows the skills of:

- Managing stress
- Verbalizing feelings
- Identifying socially accepted behaviors, and
- Making decisions about behavior.

These skills all help in developing self control.

Have An Early Warning System: We know that certain situations are stressful for children and can promote frustration and anxiety. Be aware of these potential situations and intervene before an out-of-control outburst. Look for indications that your child is becoming more anxious (your early warning system), and jump in to provide alternatives to tantrums. Clenched hands, short, abrupt movements, raised voices, heavy sighs, are





Child Development: Self Control

just a few examples of early warnings...You could even say as the board game begins--
"Sometimes it is frustrating when you are playing a game and losing. So let's agree that if either of us needs to take a break we can ask for one!" Then, when you see an early warning sign, suggest a break-time.

Discuss your family's values: Take in-the-moment opportunities to verbally state family values and give positive reinforcement for the acting out of these.

- "Tommy, I really appreciate that you asked your sister if you could use her CD player rather than just take it from her backpack. It's important to me that in this family we respect each other's belongings. Thank you for doing that."
- "Susie, it was very kind of you to ask the other children at the party if they wanted the left over birthday cake before helping yourself. Thinking of others is something that I really value and it's a wonderful part of your personality!"

Don't be afraid to lay it on thick--as long as it's honest and real it will come across as natural. Your children may roll their eyes at you, but inside—where it counts—they have received the message loud and clear.

Follow up after an outburst: After your child has calmed down and the situation has resolved, point out the negative consequences that occurred (in a matter of fact, non-judgmental way) and help your child think of other things they could do in the future that might work better. For example:

"I'm not sure I want to play another board game with you because I don't like that you threw the game piece at your sister last time. That isn't fun for her or me! If you can think of other things you could do instead, if you get frustrated, then I'd be willing to try again with you because I really do like spending time with you."

Validate the emotion: Regardless of the appropriateness of some behavior choices, the emotions behind these choices are very real. Let your child know you understand how strong temptation or frustration is. Sometimes just putting words to this and giving your child the permission to feel the feeling helps give them enough control over themselves to make an appropriate behavior decision. It also can help to state your trust in them to be able to control themselves and make the right choice.

For more tips, or if you need more information or would like to talk to someone:

In Washington State: Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE

Outside of Washington State: contact your local Circle of Parents agency at

www.circleofparents.org