



Teaching Self Control



In order to follow rules and understand limits, children need to have self-control. Self-control is the ability to cope with strong feelings and stop ourselves from doing something we want to do, but cannot (or should not). Developing self-control begins at birth and continues across our lives. Young children learn self-control through interactions with peers and guidance from parents and other loving adults.

One of the most important factors in developing self-control is the ability to soothe and calm oneself when upset. The first step in helping babies and very young children learn to soothe themselves is for their caregivers to calm and comfort them. Knowing there will be a loving adult there to soothe them when the world becomes overwhelming is a baby's first experience with self-control. This sense of being loved and understood gives babies a foundation of safety and security that is essential for coping with feelings in a healthy way. As such, children do to themselves what has been done to them – so if you want to teach your baby to self soothe, they first need to experience this being done to them. If your baby or toddler becomes distressed, offer comfort and soothing – name their feelings (e.g. you are feeling sad), offer reassurance, 'You are ok – mummy is here', speak to them in a calm and soothing voice as a way of offering comfort, use touch (such as a cuddle) and remain with the baby or toddler until they are sufficiently calm.

Young Toddlers and Self-Control

Toddlers express their strong feelings loud and clear. "No!" becomes a favourite word. Toddlers can also become easily frustrated because there are still many things that they want to do but cannot.

Here is an example of how toddlers learn self-control:

A 15-month-old grabs the television remote. His mother removes it from his hand and puts it on a bookshelf. She says, "The remote is not a toy, sweetie. I can't let you play with it. But how about this instead? She offers him a toy with lots of buttons to push and doors to open. The toddler cries for a moment to show his frustration, pointing and reaching for the remote. But once he sees that she is not giving the remote control back, he accepts this cool new toy.

What you can do to help young toddlers begin to cope with limits and provide guidance and intervention that is appropriate for you toddler's age and stage.

- * **Stay calm yourself.** You teach your child self-control by staying calm when be there to support her—even during the tough times. You are also modelling for him how to stay calm and manage strong feelings.

- * **Stop the behaviour.** For example, firmly (but not angrily) take your child's hand, get down to his level so that you are making eye contact and in a firm and calm voice, tell him *No hitting. Hitting hurts.*
- * **Label your child's feelings.** This makes him feel understood and helps him calm down. For instance, when your child is upset, name what you think he might be feeling – *"You are so angry that Liam took your toy. It's okay to feel angry. But you cannot hit. Hitting hurts"*.
- * **Offer an appropriate way to express feelings.** Show him what she *can* do to express his angry feelings, like jump up and down or stomp his feet.
- * **Help him solve the problem.** For example, go to Liam together and ask for the toy back. Use a kitchen timer to help your child learn to wait and take turns.
- * **Stand there.** When your child is having a tantrum, as long as he's not in any danger, stop for a moment and think about: *What is he struggling with? (For example, is he tired, hungry, overwhelmed, scared, frustrated, angry, and why.) How can I help him cope with these feelings? What do I want him to learn from this situation? What am I feeling and reacting to?* Hit your pause button to give yourself the time to think through what's going on for you both so that you can respond to your child in a calm and effective way.
- * **Be a role model for showing children healthy ways to cope with strong feelings.** *I can't find my keys, and we're running late. I am so frustrated right now. I think I will take a deep breath and count to five before I look for them.*
- * **Create a safe space in your home where children can go when they need a break.** This is a place that should be viewed as soothing and positive, not as punishment. Fill it with comfort objects such as pillows, stuffed animals and books. You can even ask your child to help set it up. When your child is having a breakdown or acting out, he can go there to "chill out" and regroup. You can explain that it is okay to be angry, sad, frustrated, etc, but that it is not okay to yell, hit, scream, etc. This is the safe place where children can go to feel calmer and pull themselves together.
- * **Help children learn to soothe themselves.** When a child breaks down, he is telling you that he is having trouble coping. When you comfort him, you help him learn how to soothe himself—an important life skill. This is not spoiling or giving in. It is helping him learn how to deal with disappointment and frustration.

There is an important difference between spoiling and soothing.

If your child throws a tantrum when you say "no" to television and you change the rule and let him watch, that is giving in. He is learning that a tantrum is a successful way to get what he wants. But if you let him know that you understand he is disappointed and angry (but a rule is a rule), and then help him calm down and begin another activity, you are teaching him to cope with disappointment.