

Self-Control in Infants and Young Children

by Daniel B. Overbeck, Ph.D.

It may be a surprise to some parents, but infants and young children *can* learn to control their own behaviors. Just don't expect a 10-month-old infant to have as much control as a toddler of 26 months.

Is self-control a good thing in an infant or toddler?

Yes—in moderation. A child with too little self-control may tyrannize people with impulsive, demanding behavior. Too much self-control can smother the spontaneity and creativity of early childhood. But self-control that is appropriate for the child's age helps the emotional and social development that comes later.

What does self-control—or the lack of it—look like at different ages?

Louisa, an 11-month-old, is reaching for an object. She is busy practicing the emerging skill of self-control when she hesitates because a parent says “no” or “don't touch.”

Katie, also 11 months old, shows a lack of self-control when she keeps grabbing for an object on the coffee table after a parent told her not to.

Mickey, who is 26 months old, is able to wait with appropriate calmness and patience after his father said “wait.” He has acquired the important skill of self-control, at least in that situation.

And when Gerald, also 26 months old, has a tantrum because his mother won't buy him a candy bar, he shows that he can't effectively control his behavior.

Isn't it too much to expect self-control from a little child?

Not really. Don't expect your child to always have self-control in all situations. Do expect your child to grow more able to control impulses and learn to not demand immediate satisfactions.

How can I help my child develop self-control?

There are no recipes that guarantee that your child will develop self-control, but here are some ways you can help.

First: Be consistent.

Margie's mother consistently enforces the family policy that children are not allowed to grab toys away from other children. Margie learns to expect that grabbing a toy away from her older brother will not work, and that the toy will be returned to her brother.

But Jesse knows that his father might change his mind about a toy Jesse wants. His father has said Jesse can't have the toy, but Jesse has learned that a few yells and protests might get him what he wants.

Second: Have only a few rules. Enforcing a few rules consistently and fairly is better than having many rules but not enforcing them regularly.

Having a few important rules lets Jose, 30 months old, concentrate on learning the most important rules. His success also means that his parents have more chances to give him praise and hugs for following the rules.

Next door, Jeff—also 30 months old—has had so many rules imposed that he easily forgets many of them. As a result, his parents often feel they must scold him and criticize his behavior. Eventually, Jeff learns that avoiding rules—and failing to live up to them—is easier than following them. He learns that not getting caught is the key to success.

What are internalized controls? Why are they important?

At first, your child will depend on outside reasons—praise or punishment—to control behavior. By being consistent and giving praise

when your child follows the rules, you'll help your child learn to rely instead on internal reasons for self-control, such as self-satisfaction and a sense of personal strength.

These *internalized* standards help lay the foundation for effective self-control as your child matures.

Mature self-control does not depend on external reward or punishment. Effective self-control as an older child and throughout life means following the accepted or required rules of behavior because the person recognizes the advantages of everyone behaving responsibly.

Jeremy, a 33-month-old, tries to behave correctly because he wants his parents' approval or fears their disapproval. His behavior is perfect when his parents are around. He's more impulsive and mischievous when he knows his parents aren't around to reward or punish.

How can I help my child want to behave responsibly in the future?

Again, set a few rules and enforce them consistently. If you find yourself scolding or criticizing your toddler too often, maybe you have too many rules. Or maybe the rules call for more self-control than your child has at this point.

Comment in a positive way when your child tries to exercise self-control. Acknowledge your child's efforts even if they are not always successful.

If you *must* criticize, criticize the behavior. Say: "Joey, children are not for hitting," not: "Joey, you're a bad boy for hitting your sister." Or: "Maria, food is for eating, not throwing," not: "Maria, only bad girls waste their food like that."