

FOCUS

On Early Childhood Mental Health



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Self-Regulation (Self-Control)

Children are not born with self-control. Learning self-control (or self-regulation) is one of their most important developmental tasks. Self-regulation has to do with a child's ability to control his or her emotions, respond in appropriate ways to frustration, get along well with others, and eventually become independent. Parents and care-givers can help young children learn skills to help them control or regulate themselves.

Tips for helping children to learn self-control:

- Pay attention to the signs that a child is hungry, tired or frustrated and respond consistently and predictably.
- As children grow, provide more opportunities for them to make their own decisions—such as what clothes to wear, what food to eat, where to sit—by giving them several acceptable options. Increasing children's freedom to make choices helps them become more mature.
- Provide reminders that help children make good choices and not become frustrated when they are not able to do what they want. For example, when it's naptime, give them a heads-up five minutes ahead of time to finish what they're doing.
- Anticipate problems by talking beforehand about what they can expect and what will be expected of them, for example when you go grocery shopping.
- Be empathetic and show you understand the importance of their needs and feelings.
- Talk about what children *can* do, not just about what they *can't*. Provide positive alternatives.
- Create a safe place where children can go when they need a break, to calm themselves.
- Teach children to wait; this helps them not only learn self-control but also teaches them that other people have needs too. Don't make the wait time too long, and give them something to do while they wait.

"Self-regulation in early development is influenced by a child's relationships with important adults in her life. Providing the experiences, support, and encouragement that help very young children learn to self-regulate is a critical element in quality care" (Linda Groves Gillespie and Nancy Seibel, in the *Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*).

Sources: "Self-Regulation: A Cornerstone of Early Childhood Development," *Journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*, 2006: <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200607/Gillespie709BTJ.pdf>
"Teaching Children Self-Regulation," http://www.foreverfamilies.net/xml/articles/teaching_children_self_regulation.aspx
"Teaching Your Child Discipline and Self-Control," www.zerotothree.org (click on Key Topics: Social Emotional Development)