

Teaching Our Kids Self-Control: The Superpower that gets results

Self-control is one of the most important life skills our kids can develop. Whether it's a toddler throwing a tantrum, a tween interrupting in class, or a teen glued to their phone instead of doing homework — self-control (or the lack of it) shows up in every stage of parenting.

Here's some encouraging news: self-control is a learned skill. And just like learning to read, ride a bike, or play an instrument, our kids can improve their self-control with practice, guidance, and the right tools — no matter their age or temperament. (And so can we.)

What Is Self-Control (And Why Does It Matter So Much)?

At its core, self-control is our ability to manage our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in ways that help us reach our goals. Note that the “goals” aspect matters here. Three-year-olds don't have goals due to limited cognitive development, so they don't think about whether to express or suppress their emotions. They just let it all out!

For kids, that might mean calming down instead of hitting, waiting their turn instead of pushing in, resisting a distraction rather than giving in and losing focus, or walking away from an argument rather than fighting back.

Research shows that strong self-control develops from about age three or four, and most kids are ok with it by around age 8-10. Self-control is linked to better relationships, improved wellbeing, greater academic success, and more positive life outcomes — even decades [later](#). But it's not just about long-term success. It's also about helping our children live more peaceful, connected, and meaningful lives day-to-day.

Three Self-Control Strategies That Work — At Any Age

Whether you're parenting a four-year-old or a fourteen-year-old, here are three practical, research-backed strategies that help children build better self-control:

1. **Distraction and Attention-Shifting**

Temptation thrives on attention. The more kids focus on the thing they want (the lolly, the device, the comeback in an argument), the harder it is to resist. Help your child shift their focus. Younger children might need a change of scenery or a new activity. Older children can be encouraged to engage their minds elsewhere — a different task, music, movement, even humour. Shifting attention isn't avoidance. It's smart regulation. Look at the cloud. Go for a walk. Sing a song. Pray or meditate. Shift focus and increase control.

2. **Reframing the Situation**

The way we *think* about something changes how we *feel* about it. If a child is obsessing over not being allowed something, help them see it differently. For little ones, this might sound playful: “Imagine that biscuit is actually a piece of broccoli.” For older children, it might mean encouraging

them to look at the bigger picture: “Will this still matter tomorrow?” or “What’s the most helpful way to handle this?”

3. Using a Role Model — The ‘Batman Effect’

A powerful technique, especially for younger children, is to have them imagine what someone they admire would do. “What would Batman do?” “What would Wonder Woman say?” For teens, this evolves into a question of identity and values: “Who do you want to be right now?” “What would someone you respect do here?” Stepping outside ourselves, even momentarily, gives us clarity and control.

What About Kids Who Struggle More Than Others?

Some kids — including those with ADHD, anxiety, or other challenges — may find self-control especially hard. The research tells us that the *same strategies* still work, and in fact, they often benefit these children even more. With consistency, support, and understanding, they can absolutely grow in this area. Your biggest challenge here will be that it takes a bit of extra work. But that’s the case for most things where these challenges exist.

And What About Us?

Let’s not forget — self-control isn’t just a challenge for kids. As parents, we’re often running low on patience, energy, and calm. When you feel like you’re about to snap, try these quick self-control strategies for yourself:

- **Use your name** in self-talk: “Jess, take a breath. You can handle this.”
- **Zoom out:** Ask, “Will this still matter next week?”
- **Get into nature:** A few minutes outside can reset your whole nervous system.

Our kids *catch* our calm (or our chaos). The better we regulate ourselves, the easier it is for them to learn to do the same.

Final Thoughts

We’re not aiming for perfection. We’re raising humans, not robots. Our children will still have meltdowns, make impulsive decisions, or act before they think — just like we do sometimes. But every time we coach them through those moments, we’re giving them tools they’ll use for life.

So next time your child is about to lose it — or you are — remember: this is not a character flaw. It’s a learning moment. And with time, support, and the right tools, self-control *can* be learned.

And your calm, consistent presence? That’s the best teaching tool of all.



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