### Teaching Children Self-Control

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Self-control is the ability to maintain composure in challenging situations or to stop and think before acting. It is about being aware of one’s own thoughts and feelings. Whether a situation arises at home, in a crowded store, or family gathering, there are many times when it becomes apparent that for young children, self-control is a concept that must be taught and practiced before it is learned. The following is a summary of helpful tips for teaching young children self-control.

#### Modeling Appropriate Behavior

District #7 has adopted the classroom management concept of *Conscious Discipline* from Dr. Becky Bailey. *Conscious Discipline* focuses on being cognizant of children’s social and emotional needs in their educational experience. The bottom line discussed in Dr. Becky Bailey’s book, entitled, *Conscious Discipline: 7 Basic Skills for Brain Smart Classroom Management*, is that parents, teachers, or caregivers must first be aware of their own thoughts and feelings before they can teach self-control. The same techniques used within the classroom can also serve as a tool for parents and caregivers to use as a behavioral bridge between home and school.

Remember that your actions as a parent, caregiver, or teacher serve as a model to your children of how to respond to frustrating situations. Maintaining your own composure during frustrating moments is a wonderful teaching tool. Consider the following:

- **You are in a rush to get out the door to take your children to the bus stop or daycare.** You cannot find the car keys and begin searching frantically. Rather than becoming upset, you can ask your children to help in the search. If the search is unsuccessful, verbally walk through the next step with your children. “Now I am going to take deep breaths and retrace my steps to remember the last time I had the keys.” This teaches children that maintaining self-control helps you to problem solve in irritating situations.

#### Basic Strategies for Teaching Self-Control

When considering the need for teaching self-control, begin by choosing an age appropriate goal. Setting simple, easily achievable goals set children up for success. For a preschool child, an appropriate goal might be to comply with bath time or bed time rules. For elementary school age children, a goal may involve using words to express anger rather than hitting siblings. Some basic strategies that assist children in learning self-control include the following:

- **Taking breaks** - When a child experiences a frustrating situation, encourage the child to take a break or remove him or herself from the situation for a moment. An
example of taking a break from *Conscious Discipline* includes encouragement to breathe and to be a S.T.A.R. A certain area of the home or classroom may be used to calm and will be referred to in this article as the safe place.

- **Breathing Techniques**
  - When tense, scared, or angry, breathing often becomes quick and shallow which changes the way the brain handles the situation.
  - Taking slow, deep breaths is calming and allows more oxygen to the brain.
  - S.T.A.R. stands for Stop or (Smile), Take a deep breath, And Relax. This technique is typically done when sitting and involves taking a deep breath and relaxing body parts such as eyes, mouth, and shoulders.

- **The Safe Place**
  - The safe place is an area of the home or classroom where the child can remove him or herself from the angry or frustrating situation and regain control. It is not time-out.
  - The safe place may include a rug or bean bag and can be filled with soft item such as blankets or stuffed animals to help the child self-calm.
  - Some children cannot self calm and may need visual pictures and adult models to physically and verbally walk them through being a S.T.A.R. by taking deep breaths in addition to identifying the feeling. For example:  
    “Your face looks angry. It looks like this (make the face). Let’s take deep breaths.” When the child appears calm, you can ask or say, “You do not look angry anymore. Are you ready to join us?”

- **Recognizing and Understanding Feelings** - Practice recognizing and understanding feelings and appropriate strategies for what to do when you feel a certain way so that your child will be better equipped to know what to do when the situation arises.
  - A great way to identify and describe feelings is by reading children’s books. There are many children’s books that involve characters who are dealing with a variety of feelings. Talk about each feelings as you read the book. Ask questions and discuss the following:

    (1) *How does the character feel?* (2) *How can you tell?* (3) *What does their face look like?* (other body cues) (4) *Show me what you look like when you feel that way.* (5) *Tell me about a time when you felt that way.*
• Focus on the basic feelings and the body’s manifestation of the feeling.
  - **Happy**: smile, laugh, calm, relaxed muscles
  - **Sad**: frown, cry, stomach hurts
  - **Angry**: red face, frown, arms crossed, breathing fast
  - **Scared/Worried**: eyes open wide, heart beats fast, scream or gasp

• While this is not an exhaustive list, the following children’s books focus on a variety of different feelings.
  - *Today I Feel Silly and Other Moods That Make My Day* by Jamie Lee Curtis
  - *The Way I Feel* by Jana Cain
  - *Feelings* by Aliki
  - *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss
  - *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes
  - *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst
  - *Mean Soup* by Betsy Everitt
  - *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes
  - *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by A. Wolf, as told to Jon Scieszka
  - *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister
  - *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein

**Choices**

Choices empower children by enabling them to be a part of decision making processes or the order of events. Choices can be given in the moment or provided ahead of time to prevent behavioral overreactions. Consider the following:

- **It is time for your child to go to bed and brushing teeth is a part of the bed time routine. Your child typically refuses to brush his or her teeth. When it is time for bed, say, “It is time for bed. Which would you like to do first, put on your pajamas or brush your teeth?”**

In this instance, it is implied that both activities must be performed but your child will feel empowered by being able to choose the order of events.

As well, maintaining your composure during a child’s meltdown or outburst instead of giving in to the child lets the child know that the behavioral overreaction is not an effective method for obtaining what he or she desires. For example:

- **If you are in a grocery store before dinner and your child begins to cry and get upset after you say they cannot have candy, do not give in to the child. Even if you are embarrassed by the outburst or tantrum do not give in. You can, however,**
validate their feelings and then give them a choice. “I see that you are crying. You are sad because I said that you cannot have candy. It is ok to feel sad. Let’s finish our shopping. You may choose to get ice cream or cookies (two things your child likes) for dessert. Which will you choose?

**Consequences**

When a child engages in an inappropriate behavior as a result of loss of self-control, (hitting others, etc.) explain that the behavior is unacceptable and describe the consequence as a result.

- “You wanted to let your brother know you were angry because you wanted to play with the train so you hit him. You may not hit. Hitting is not safe. When you want your brother to know you are angry, say: I feel angry because________.”
- Explain the consequence. “If you want to play with the train, you have a choice to hit or to say, ‘May I play please? If you choose to hit, you will not be allowed to play with the train. Do you understand what will happen if you hit? Tell me. (Wait for response)
- If the child hits again, say, “This is very sad. You may not play with the train today. You may play with ______ or _________.

**Appropriate Rewards**

Providing children with positive praise and attention by stating the specific behavior he or she exhibited well lets the child know what behavior is desired and increases the likelihood that it will occur again.

- For example, if your child often interrupts when you are speaking and you catch your child waiting to speak, say, “Ian, you waited for Mommy to finish talking first before you asked a question so I could hear what you had to say. That was helpful!”

**Summary**

While this is only a sampling of methods used for teaching young children self-control, the previously discussed strategies have been used effectively to support students in District#7. Should you feel that your child’s inability to control his or her behavior falls beyond the normal range or in comparison to peers, it may be beneficial to consult with your child’s school, daycare, or pediatrician to obtain more specific strategies or professional assistance.

As parents, teachers, and caregivers, it is important to remember that you are the best model for which to teach your children self-control. Providing your children with an environment rich in choices, assisting children with recognizing and understanding their own feelings and the feelings of others, in addition to modeling and practicing self-calming techniques are all effective methods for preparing your children with the tools they will need when encountering frustrating situations. While teaching these skills can be frustrating and, at times, may appear fruitless, it is important to remember that self-control is a life skill and your efforts are building a strong social-emotional foundation.
References


