

Building Self Control in Young Children **Pat Blackwell, Ph.D.**

Keys to teaching healthy emotion regulation are:

Observation- What is the child's temperament profile? What are the child's triggers? Parents must be emotionally available, empathetic, and show appropriate responsiveness to the child's emotions. Avoid minimizing emotions. Some children have temperaments that make emotion control more manageable- some kids need extra help.

Modeling- Caregivers take time to explain the connections between emotions and behavior. They exercise healthy emotional expression in the context of discipline, i.e. they stay calm.

The connection between thinking (cognition) and feeling-

Conscious awareness of emotions and emotion management skills help children master self-control. When children understand their own triggers, they become progressively more independent in the process of managing their behavior. Take time to teach skills outside of emotionally charged situations by reading books, using puppets, and discussing solutions to problems.

Active teaching of emotion control

- Label emotions and build an emotional vocabulary.
- Educate the child about acceptable ways of expressing strong feelings. Develop some **scaffolds** such as saying "stop and think" to your child when he is ready to act impulsively. Or say something like "practice your patience."
- Encourage your child to USE the skills that she has to practice self-control. Discuss the importance of self control.
- Caregivers must be available when stress becomes unmanageable for the child (this will vary for each child based on unique temperament). Teach the child to become aware of the body's way of signaling intense emotions (how anger and fear feel in the body). Then teach the child to be mindful of the gradual escalation from calm to mildly upset to out of control.
- Encourage the child to stop and name his or her feeling before using strategies to calm down.
- It is best to anticipate difficult situations for the child and minimize undue stress. Keeping the child's mood manageable helps the child practice self-regulatory skills. The time to use strategies for self-control is when the child is still able to control himself.
- Praise your child for success- be very specific about what the child did right (such as using calming strategies like counting, breathing, and self-talk).

- Consequences should be logical to the behavior. Time out is best used as a chill-out to recharge rather than punishment (see the handout How to Create a Comfort Corner at Home).
- Know the child's temperament profile and what sorts of things are challenging for her. Make sure your child knows her triggers and soothers (help her figure this out and write it down).

Make sure the home environment is set up to promote the best behavior

- Be responsive or emotionally available each day (but not all day- designate a specific time each day to be 100% focused and play, listen, or just be with your child).
- Focuses *not* on reducing the expression of emotion but instead on helping the child express emotions acceptably. Discipline *expression of feelings*, not feelings themselves e.g., "It is okay to be mad, but I will not let you hit friends."
- Use positive discipline strategies- Adopt a teaching orientation rather than relying on punishment to promote good behavior.
- Reduce intrusiveness (avoid hovering). Give the child opportunities to problem solve with increasing independence- raise the bar as they master difficult situations. When a child takes a toy try: "What is another way you can say I want that toy?"
- *Model* healthy emotional expression and self-awareness
- Observe your child's behavior (What are the patterns? Is hunger a trigger? Does he handle stress better at a specific time of day? Does he need a warning before a transition?)
- Make your child consciously aware of her own triggers and soothers- help her anticipate difficulties and solutions before there is trouble.
- Have the child practice calming strategies on a regular basis, not just when she is upset.
- Set consistent and predictable limits on behavior that are appropriate rather than unrealistic for the child. Regularly talk to your child about limits, expectations, rules, and daily routines.
- Read books with the child about emotions- sing songs and help her label emotions.
- Reduce negatives increase positive directives. Tell the child what she CAN do- Avoid "no," "don't," "stop" when possible. Instead of "No Running," try "Walk."

Some additional points:

It is essential to help children learn to separate emotion from behavior. Then they must learn (by practicing) acceptable ways of expressing the emotion. They must also learn that they have a choice of behaving well or behaving "less well."

Be aware if your child is stuck on a particular way of thinking about emotionally triggering situations. Encourage her to have the power to change her way of thinking and talk back to her emotions. Children like to hear that self-control is more powerful than having a meltdown.

Help children to understand what they can and cannot control. They can manage their own behavior, not the behavior of others. On the way to this skill, caregivers can teach the child to be sensitive to the feelings of others but not controlled by others.

Children learn more from rewards than punishment. Find a consistent way of rewarding desired behavior. Avoid removing, punishing, and put-downs.

Spend time each day playing with your child to build a vibrant relationship. Children who have challenging behavior must be rewarded more for good behavior than bad behavior. Focused play sessions make this happen! Play sessions between parent and child are crucial and definitely have an impact on emotional development. Designate 15 minutes each day and follow your child's lead in play. Do not lead the play yourself. Refrain from quizzing your child, directing his play, or teaching him. During this play session, your child is in charge. Comment on when the child is doing as a sportscaster would. Praise his efforts, be present in mind and body (no multi-tasking or checking texts).

The motto is progress, not perfection!

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How to Create a Comfort Corner at Home

A comfort corner is a refuge or safe space for children to go to calm down, reflect, or practice mindfulness. This space should not be confused with time out and should never be used for punishment! It is a proactive measure that will help children deescalate when their distress is elevating. Children should be encouraged to enjoy this area regularly and not just when they are upset. Parents may increase a child's enjoyment of this space by playing with him or her in the space often. Parents and children may read about emotions there, practice deep breathing, stretching (yoga), or visualizing comforting places. A comfort corner may be helpful in multiple environments, including home, school, and wherever the child is cared for regularly (such as the home of a grandparent or other caregiver).

Comfort corners may be literally a corner in a child's room with pillows, a bean bag chair, soft things to hold, and some books to look at. Some form of reduced stimulation offered by a tent or blanket fort is comforting. Some children like their space to be very contained such as behind the sofa or in a large closet space. (Children should be observable and never enclosed in a closet or room behind closed doors). Children who have sensory sensitivities may benefit from particular elements such as chew sticks, a tent, fidgets, a weighted vest/blanket/toy, therapy balls, or even a swing. Most children enjoy having their comfort corner personalized to make it their own. This should be encouraged.

Many cues signal the escalation of mood. Children should be encouraged to tune in to their bodies, thoughts, and behavior before they get too upset to calm down. Stress is most manageable before the child is too aroused. Parents can help children tune in by saying what they are observing, validating the child's distress, and inquiring about thoughts and feelings. Never tell a child what they are feeling, ask them how they feel. If they don't know, say what you are observing and use wondering questions such as "I wonder if you have some angry feelings?" Then redirect the child to the comfort corner to think things over and calm down. It is okay for parents to join the child in the corner because this is not time out. However, parents should send the message that it is the child's job to calm him or herself down. Then leave them to their thoughts.

The calming corner may have either a visual chart of calming strategies or a listing of helpful things to do. A children's yoga chart may be an excellent addition. Praise the child for using the comfort space when he or she is upset.

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