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Control Yourself!

Why self-control matters to you and your teen

By **Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D., and Kristen A. Russell**

What do you think when you see a child throwing a tantrum, a tween using profanity or a teen taunting a vulnerable peer? And how do you feel when you read about the percentage of students who cheat, the stats on date rape and the latest politician with an alcohol, adultery or gambling problem? Most likely, you think, “They have no self-control!” But in reality, almost everyone could benefit from developing more of this valuable skill.

Many parents believe that a high IQ and great test scores are the best indicators of how successful their children will be at realizing ambitious goals. But new research reveals that there is more to that equation. If you want your children to be truly successful in life, you need to help them cultivate strong self-control. In fact, studies show that compared to IQ and SAT scores, self-control is twice as predictive of health, income levels and relationship stability in adulthood.

Self-control helps children succeed in virtually every aspect of life, including academic success, romantic happiness, physical health and financial stability. Self-control is an “executive functioning skill,” which, like a CEO in the brain (specifically, the prefrontal cortex), helps run the responsible business operations of life.

Over time, children develop the ability to stay focused and follow through on all manner of important tasks. They set goals, make a plan to achieve those goals and persist in the face of difficulty. And these kids are also able to take a hard look at their own progress, and evaluate and adjust as needed. How do kids develop these capabilities? Through practice, practice and more practice of those self-control skills.

We can't expect our kids to fully master self-control by age 15 or even age 20; for most of us, true self-control remains a lifelong challenge. What influences how much self-control your kids will exhibit as they grow up?

There are six major factors:

1. Their temperament and yours
2. The way emotions and thinking work in the brain

3. The changes in the brain (and hormones!) during adolescence
4. Your parenting style
5. Your family's routines and habits
6. Your child's opportunities to practice willpower and self-regulation

These factors also affect whether cultivating self-control will be relatively easy or more challenging. Yet cultivate it we must.

External controls and building self-control

Self-control begins with socialization, which is the process of learning what society expects and then finding ways to self-govern accordingly.

Whether you realize it or not, you are teaching your child the important lessons of socialization from the moment he is born.

By establishing consistent rules and structures (“external controls”) in the first few years of life, and then reinforcing and building on those foundations as your child grows, you are not only helping to keep your child safe, you are teaching him how to be socially acceptable.

This learning process continues throughout adolescence, as your child develops the ability to self-regulate, and in response, you gradually loosen the external controls.

Your child's particular path to socialization may be straightforward and intuitive, or it could be more of a struggle, depending on environmental influences; cultural background; your child's innate, genetic predispositions; and your personality, parenting style and parenting philosophy.

Parents who are highly self-controlled are likely to embrace a more authoritative parenting style when it comes to establishing external controls. They are also likely to have a child born with a predisposition to self-regulate.

The opposite is also true: Parents who don't like routines, are inconsistent with rules and policies, and pursue pleasures or self-gratifying activities (even work) with abandon are less likely to establish the structure that



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promotes self-discipline in their child. But even these parents can choose to implement parenting practices that promote the essential skill of self-control.

Temperament and the parent's role

Temperament is a code word in psychology referring to a child's inborn personality characteristics. Children may vary in their fear of new experiences, conscientiousness, agreeableness, feelings about socializing and other characteristics.

In some ways, your child's temperament is simply out of your hands; some behavioral tendencies will endure from cradle to grave. But what your child makes of that innate temperament can be greatly affected by your nurturing. The introverted child may become a famous academic or a hermit, and the aggressive extrovert may become a successful entrepreneur or a con artist.

Parent navigation plays a big (but not all-determining) role in the equation. Random events, either good or bad, also play a role, as do the kind of neighborhood and community the child grows up in, the psychological services available to her, the school she attends and the financial resources at her family's disposal.

When children are impulsive, resistant, irritable or aggressive, they easily elicit negative reactions from parents. It takes parental self-control to make positive headway with difficult children — rewards and consistent structure are a couple of tools these parents can use.

Parents who have kids with “middle of the road” temperaments will also face mood challenges and developmental “hitches,” because all children exhibit their fair share of resistance to rules and limits, especially during the tween and teen years.

Most child development experts agree that it's important to tailor your parenting style to the temperament of your child, avoid thinking you can mold and shape your child as you please, and realize that what works for one of your children may not work for another.

Scaffolding

Savvy parents of high-energy, thrill-seeking children know their kids enjoy risk and stimulation. These kids need safe and fun outlets for their sensation-seeking drives. Their parents need to ignore a lot of low-level goofy behaviors, but arrange for these kids to exercise their self-control muscle while not overwhelming them with unrealistic expectations.

This is where “scaffolding” comes in. Parents assist, coach and set up routines so that children can learn new skills and stay on track; they remove the scaffolding — their supervision and structure — when the child is capable of self-government. Self-control is involved in learning table manners, delayed gratification while budgeting for special purchases, perseverance with chores and homework, and frustration tolerance while following rules. It's tiring, for parents and children, so fun and relaxation need to be figured into the routine, too!

Parents of shy or anxious children know that certain social or unfamiliar situations are super taxing for them. These children benefit from firmly established expectations that they will stretch their comfort zones, participate in some negotiated activities and learn to cope with their overreactive “fear detection” brains.

Parents need to model self-control — after all, we are the adults, with more mature brains and greater wisdom. What child wants to accept influence from a parent he perceives as a tyrant? Remember, all attention is reinforcing, and even negative feedback and punishment can cause more of the unattractive behaviors we're trying to discourage. We can start out trying to control them, enter into unproductive power struggles and then realize that to be effective, self-control has to begin with parents.

Wise-minded parenting

When kids have lapses in self-control, parents often respond in one of two classic yet ineffective ways: emotional outbursts or lectures. A wise-minded parenting approach involves quelling our emotions so that we can think from a broad perspective about what is really possible to control when dealing with a distressed, hormonal, immature or highly aroused child. When kids express negative emotions or behaviors, we often react with our own emotional reactivity, criticism or lectures. With a wise-minded



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approach, we first control our own emotions, and then, with a calmer brain, we decide on realistic goals and skillful approaches to problem-solving.

Let's see how these parents work on their own self-control in some trying parenting situations:

Tween: I've gotta have Nike Vapors for soccer! Don't make me a loser by buying secondhand cleats! You are so cheap! You don't care about me!

Mom (with an understandable but ineffective response): You are such a brat. You don't deserve new cleats with a mouth like that.

On a wise-minded day:

Mom: This purchase is a huge deal for you. Right now, you feel like the right cleats could be the difference between being a winner and a loser. High stakes. How are you feeling about soccer these days?

Wise-minded mom knows that even though she might be right about her daughter's brattiness and mouthiness, criticism won't help her accept secondhand cleats or control her impulses. This mom validates her daughter, tries to get her talking about soccer and the origins of her stress, and waits to talk about budgets and purchase decisions when things are calmer.

Teen: Dad, I don't have any homework. I'm going skateboarding with Jason before dinner.

Dad (in an understandable but ineffective response): You and Jason always get in trouble together. Plus, you know you have homework to do, so don't lie to me about having it done. With your grades, you won't be running off for rowdy times with Jason anymore.

On a wise-minded day:

Dad: Hey, sorry to be a wet blanket, buddy, but I'm sticking with our new routine. Study halls for homework before dinner for everybody! If you're feeling restless, you can set the table. Here are some carrots if you need an appetizer.

Wise-minded dad knows that reminding his son of his considerable misdeeds won't help him get cooperation or agreement. His goals are

avoiding a fight and finessing his son to either do his homework or set the table.

The take-home point? Parents need to practice self-control themselves to be able to choose productive responses when their child loses her grasp on her developing self-control.

Adapted from *Wise-Minded Parenting: 7 Essentials of Successful Tweens and Teens* by Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D., with Kristen A. Russell, published by ParentMap. To order, visit wisemindedparenting.com.

Tips for building self-control

- Adjust your goals according to your child's temperament, track record and age.
- Remove structure and supervision "scaffolding" as your child demonstrates self-government.
- Choose organized activities that stretch your child's capacities for self-control.
- Include R & R in your family's routines.
- Remember to stay mostly positive and ignore low-level messy behaviors.
- Model wise-minded self-control of your own emotions when dealing with your child's lapses.

Tips, quizzes, tools and activities to help you work on self-control — for yourself and your child — are available in Kastner and Russell's book.