# **Impulse control techniques that work for children**

**Source:** [www.verywellfamiy.com](http://www.verywellfamiy.com)

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Impulse control can be a challenge—and developmentally appropriate—for many kids, particularly little ones. However, it is a vital skill that can be nurtured and improved upon at any age. This is important as a lack of impulse control is at the root of many [behavior problems](https://www.verywellfamily.com/common-child-behavior-problems-and-their-solutions-1094944). Without effective intervention, impulsive behaviors can become normalized, habitual, and worsen over time.

For example, impulsive 5-year-olds may hit or have tantrums when they don't get their way, while impulsive 14-year-olds may share inappropriate content on social media or engage in risky behaviors like drinking alcohol without thinking about the potential ramifications.

However, you can help your child learn to improve their impulse control as they grow. In fact, studies show that interventions to improve impulse control (and other elements of executive function) can be very helpful in bolstering these skills.

Research shows that poor impulse control is linked with impaired decision-making and the development of mental health conditions. So, the more impulse control your child gains, the less likely they'll be to do or say something that can harm others and themselves—and they'll be more likely to have positive mental health.

### **Consider if Your Child has ADHD**

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) impacts approximately 11% of children. Impulse control, attention issues, difficulty remembering, and trouble following directions are all common symptoms of ADHD. Kids with ADHD may need extra support to develop these skills.

If you think your child may have ADHD, contact their doctor for evaluation. Treatment options include medications, therapy, and structural supports. Often a variety of coping methods are used to help kids with neurodiverse brains thrive.

## **Teach Your Child to Label Feelings:**

Kids who don't understand or know how to effectively communicate their emotions are more likely to be impulsive. A child who can't say, "I'm angry" may hit to show they're upset. Or a child who can't verbalize, "I feel sad," may throw themselves to the floor and scream.4

Teach your child to recognize their feelings so they can tell you—rather than show you—how they feel. Start by teaching your child [how to label their emotions](https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-to-teach-kids-about-feelings-1095012), such as angry, sad, excited, surprised, worried, or scared.Then, talk about the difference between feelings and behavior.

Make sure they know it's okay to feel angry, but it's not okay to hit, kick, or yell at someone when they're angry. When they're able to talk about their emotions in a meaningful way, they'll be more likely to feel heard and supported—and less likely to feel the need to act out.

## **Ask Your Child to Repeat the Directions**

Sometimes, kids behave impulsively because they don’t listen to directions, this is particularly true of kids who have ADHD.3 Help them stay on track by making sure they're actually listening. Otherwise, before you’ve finished your instructions, they may sprint into action without any idea what you said.

Teach your child to [listen to directions](https://www.verywellfamily.com/discipline-4157347) by asking them to repeat your instructions before taking action.5 Before you start your instructions, say, "Before you move, I want you to explain the directions back to me." And once you've finished, you can ask, "OK, what did I just tell you to do?"

Only after they're able to repeat back what you said—whether it's to clean their room or to put away their homework—should they be able to take action.

Additionally, aim to make directions simple, easy-to-follow, and with as few steps as possible. Consider your child's developmental readiness to follow multi-step directions as well.You can also try writing down directions so that they have a reference if they forget what they need to do.

## **Teach Problem-Solving Skills**

Although brainstorming solutions sounds simple, [problem-solving](https://www.verywellfamily.com/teach-kids-problem-solving-skills-1095015) can be one of the most effective impulse control techniques.7

Teach your child that there is more than one way to solve a problem and that it is helpful to evaluate several potential solutions before springing into action. So, whether your child is trying to fix the chain on their bicycle or trying to figure out a math problem, encourage them to brainstorm at least five possible ways to solve a problem before deciding what to do.

After identifying possible solutions, help them evaluate which solution is most likely to be effective. With practice, they can get used to thinking before they act.

## **Teach Anger Management Skills**

Low frustration tolerance may cause impulsive outbursts. [Teaching your child anger management skills](https://www.verywellfamily.com/ways-to-teach-your-child-anger-management-skills-1095010) can help them deal with their emotions in a healthy way.8

Show them specific strategies, like taking a few deep breaths or walking around the house to burn off some energy. You can even create a calm-down kit filled with tools that will help them relax. It's best to teach children how to calm down, make more appropriate choices, and/or place them in a calm-down space before impulsively reacting.

## **Establish Household Rules**

Create clear rules and explain the reasons behind your rules. Providing your child with structure and expectations can help improve impulse control because they know what behavior is desired from them. In fact, research shows that kids tend to thrive with the routine and structure offered by family rules.

Make your expectations known before your child enters new situations. When they understand the need to use an indoor voice in the library or walk in the grocery store, they'll be less likely to misbehave.

Explain the [negative consequences](https://www.verywellfamily.com/discipline-kids-with-positive-and-negative-consequences-1094780) of breaking the rules ahead of time, as well. Then, they'll be able to make better-informed decisions about their behavior.

## **Provide Structure and Be Consistent**

Keep your [discipline consistent](https://www.verywellfamily.com/ways-to-make-your-discipline-consistent-1094831) and your child's routine the same. Less chaos reduces impulsive behavior.10

Offer reminders like, “You need to hold my hand in the parking lot when we get out of the car,” every time you go to the store. With enough practice, your child will grow accustomed to your rules and the consequences of breaking them.

## **Create a Reward System**

Kids need opportunities to practice [delayed gratification](https://www.verywellfamily.com/delay-of-gratification-meaning-for-tweens-3287998). Make delayed gratification fun by creating a reward system. A [token economy system](https://www.verywellfamily.com/create-a-token-economy-system-to-improve-child-behavior-1094888) can be a fun way to do this. Reward your child's good behavior with tokens. Then, allow them to exchange tokens for bigger rewards, like a trip to the park.

Create small incentives that only require one or two tokens as well as big rewards, that require 20 tokens. Then, encourage your child to save up their tokens for bigger ticket items, like going to the movies. Saving up for bigger rewards will teach them how to wait, an essential skill that will help them resist temptations that may lead to impulsive choices.

## **Be a Good Role Model**

Your child will learn a lot about impulse control by watching you. Model appropriate ways to wait patiently and tolerate delayed gratification. Point out impulse control techniques that you're using by saying things like, "I'd really like to buy that new laptop but I'm going to save my money for our vacation next summer."

Talking to yourself out loud will teach your child how to develop an internal dialogue that will help them manage their impulses. Researchers at the University of Toronto found that self-talk plays a major role in helping kids manage their impulsive behavior.

Role model healthy self-talk by saying things like, "This is a long line but we have to wait patiently for our turn."

## **Encourage Physical Activity**

Encourage your child to play outside and ensure that they get plenty of exercise. A child who has had an opportunity to run, jump, and climb will be better equipped to be more [self-disciplined](https://www.verywellfamily.com/importance-of-teaching-kids-self-discipline-1095017).

Limit your child's screen time and encourage them to be physically active whenever possible. Look for opportunities to play outdoor games together as well. Tossing a ball, playing hopscotch, or playing tag will get direct their energy into positive actions rather than impulsive, inappropriate ones.

## **Play Impulse Control Games**

Games such as Simon Says, Red Light Green Light, and Follow the Leader will give your child opportunities to practice impulse control. And your child will likely enjoy playing them while they learn.

With practice, your child can train their brain to have better self-control. But make sure you make practice fun. If you force them to sit still or pay attention to boring tasks too long, your efforts may backfire.

It's normal for young children to be physically impulsive. [Hitting,](https://www.verywellfamily.com/why-does-my-toddler-hit-himself-4159820) jumping off furniture, or running in the grocery store are common impulse control problems.

By the tween and teen years, most kids have gained control over their physical impulses but they may still be verbally impulsive. Your child may blurt things out without thinking about how their words may be perceived or may say unkind things when they're angry.

With practice and consistent discipline, impulse control should improve over time. If, however, you have concerns about your child's ability to make healthy decisions or your child seems to be struggling more than other children their age, talk to their pediatrician. Underlying conditions, like ADHD, may interfere with your child's ability to manage impulsive behavior, but treatment can be a big help.