

How to Teach Kids Self-Discipline

You see it every day. American kids don't want to wait. Indeed, many don't seem able to wait - for anything! And while many parents say they're trying to instill patience and self-control in their children, you can see their frustration levels rising.

Children have never been particularly patient; self-control is a learned skill. But changes in our culture have created a generation of kids accustomed to getting what they want, when they want it - whether it's the latest iPod; costly lessons in sports, dance and music; or even a new car when they reach driving age. There are simply more "things" available to kids today, and more parents with money to spend on them.

The trouble lies in how this instant gratification has affected children's character and values. The nonprofit research organization Public Agenda identified the problem in its 2002 report, "Easier Said Than Done." Based on its poll of 1,607 U.S. parents of children ages 5 to 17, the report claimed that only 34 percent of parents believe they've succeeded in teaching their kids self-control and self-discipline - that is, the ability to wait, to think before acting and to understand potential consequences of their actions.

Most parents, the report notes, describe American society as "an inhospitable climate for raising children, where parents can never let their guard down in the face of popular culture, drugs and crime." Their biggest worry? Protecting kids from negative social influences.

Advertisements pushing the latest "must-have" snack food, sneaker brand or toy are one factor. The media's ever-increasing reliance on sex, violence and disrespect - in TV, film, video game and Internet content - is another. Parents worry that kids see the inappropriate behavior in much media content as the norm in everyday life.

But beyond media influences, the opportunities for children to make risky decisions are plentiful. For young children, that can range from ignoring parents' limits to bullying others to get what they want. For older kids, the risks are greater: earlier sexual relationships, drug or alcohol abuse, reckless driving, and more.

"Kids are bombarded with more temptations than ever before," says Charles Fay, Ph.D., an expert in child and family psychology with the Love and Logic Institute, which provides parenting education and consults with schools nationwide. "At the same time," he adds, "there are fewer adults at home or in the neighborhood willing to help raise your child. When today's parents were growing up, many

neighbors didn't think twice about disciplining someone else's kid. That doesn't happen very often today."

With the safety net down, and the sense that mistakes are more costly, children need to develop "a little voice in their heads reminding them of the consequences of their choices," says Fay. That voice gives them the ability to control their impulses and make good choices. More than that, he says, when kids do the right thing, they feel good about themselves.

A Crucial Life Skill

"Self-discipline means taking ownership, accountability and responsibility for our behavior. It is one of the most important qualities we can help our kids develop," says Robert Brooks, Ph.D., a Harvard Medical School psychologist and child development expert who has written and lectured extensively on self-esteem and resilience in kids. He's currently writing a book that promotes self-discipline and resilience.

"Self-discipline will give them the ability to think before they act, improve their relationships with others, enable them to perform better at school and at work and to become good problem solvers," Brooks says.

The dieter's decision to forego the pizza, the smoker's vow never to light another cigarette and the compulsive shopper's resolution to avoid the latest sale are only implemented by people who have the ability to delay gratification, insists Walter Mischel, Ph.D., a renowned psychologist of personality at Columbia University. It is through this ability to delay gratification that one is able to reach long-term goals.

Mischel's famous longitudinal research study, "The Marshmallow Test," showed the importance of impulse control - and delayed gratification - for academic, emotional and social success. In the 1960s at a preschool on the Stanford University campus, Mischel put marshmallows in front of a room full of 4-year-olds. He told them they could have one marshmallow now, but if they could wait several minutes, they could have two. Some children eagerly grabbed a marshmallow and ate it. Others waited, some having to cover their eyes in order not to see the tempting treat. Mischel followed the group and found that, 14 years later, the "grabbers" suffered low self-esteem and were viewed by others as stubborn, prone to envy and easily frustrated. The "waiters" were better copers, more socially competent and self-assertive, trustworthy, dependable and more academically successful. This group even scored about 210 points higher on their SATs.

Parenting in the 'Gimme' Age

Parents overwhelmingly agree that teaching self-discipline is important, yet relatively few believe they've been successful doing it, according to the Public Agenda report. And they don't think their peers are doing any better. Six in 10 rate other parents as only "fair" or "poor" in raising children.

They're not the only ones who feel that way. "Teachers often tell me that kids today seem more impulsive and less self-reflective," notes Brooks. But he also points out that today's parents face significant challenges from the world around them. Kids, he says:

- Have limited experience with delayed gratification. In fact, their lives are saturated with instant gratification from technology that delivers information and results faster than ever;
- Experience an enormous amount of stimulation every day, from the media and other technological gadgets;
- Have less downtime with the adults in their lives, due to the frantic pace of family life. In addition, children's packed daily schedules provide few opportunities for them to think before they act.

Making a concerted effort to slow down and spend time together as a family is part of the solution. Cutting back on materialism is another, says psychologist and organization consultant Donna Genett, Ph.D., and author of the book *Help Your Kids Get It Done Right at Home and at School!*, which helps parents teach their kids to be more self-sufficient and disciplined.

"It all started with two-income households in which children had no consistent caregivers," Genett says. "Parents tried to make up for the lack of time spent with their children by giving them things. They wanted to make their children's lives better than their own and have tried to do it with things. The result is that children today have a great sense of entitlement."

Some parents don't seem to realize that it's OK not to give their children everything, she says. "I have a friend who is a single mother of a teenager. She has just lost her job to downsizing and she is trying to figure out how to pay her daughter's college fees. She's trying to keep up with the dual-income families. Her daughter would probably value her education more and get more satisfaction if she helped pay for it herself."

From Discipline to Self-Discipline

As troubling as today's culture may be, teaching children self-control and self-discipline has always been part of a parent's job. Parenting today may be more challenging, but it "does not mean we need to throw up our hands," Brooks says.

"One of a parent's most important roles is to be a disciplinarian," he says, pointing out that the word discipline comes from the word disciple. "It implies a teaching relationship. What we want to do is parent in ways that promote the development of self-discipline."

How do you do this?

Start by setting and maintaining consistent limits. Young children need parents to set boundaries, says Genett. "Children need to know that parents will do what it takes to keep them safe. These limits help them develop a healthy personality. As they grow up, they integrate these limits into their own self-discipline."

"If parents don't set limits, kids become unruly, and take physical and psychological risks," she says. "These children are unhappy and often have psychological problems. They know something is wrong, but they don't know what to do about it."

As children get older, involve them in developing their own rules and consequences, Brooks advises. This also allows parents to teach kids that rules are not arbitrary; there are reasons for them.

Pay attention to how you parent. Parenting styles make a difference in teaching self-discipline, says Fay. He describes three typical parenting approaches, but notes that only one of them does the job:

- Drill Sergeant Parents - Constantly tell kids what decisions to make and what their values should be. They bark out orders and expect their kids to follow them. Their children grow up needing someone to tell them what to do, says Fay.
- Helicopter Parents - Hover over their children, and when the kids make a bad decision, they swoop in and solve the problem. Their kids grow up believing they need someone to rescue them.
- Consultant Parents - Boss and rescue as little as possible. They share their thoughts, but they don't tell kids what to do. They don't take on a child's problem as their own. Their strategy is to give their kids the opportunity to make choices when the consequences are small and then let the children deal with the consequences of their decisions. Ultimately, this helps a child develop self-discipline.

The power of consultant parents is that they allow kids to live their lives in a safe, learning environment. When a child experiences success, it is his or her own.

"A lot of people have been raised to believe that good parents make sure their kids are always good," says Fay. "The result is that they micromanage their child's life and their child doesn't learn anything."

In today's competitive, fast-moving world, children and teens can make big mistakes that have serious, even lifelong, consequences. That's why self-discipline and self-control are so important, and it's why parents need to help guide their kids to find and listen to that still, small voice inside - the one that reflects values, knowing what's right and wrong, patience and sound reasoning.

"The price tag for mistakes goes up every day," Fay says. "It's good for kids to make lots of mistakes when the consequences are small."

By Sandra Whitehead