

Tips to Help a Child with Impulse Control

By Joyce Cooper-Kahn PhD and Laurie Dietzel PhD

Impulse control is the ability to stop and think before acting. It's one of the executive functions children need in order to control their thoughts and actions in family, social, and school settings.

It's important for parents to remember that young children are not expected to consistently control their impulses or their thoughts and actions. They rely heavily on adults to help them control themselves. As kids mature, we expect them to internalize rules and to develop better and better self-control so that they are not at the mercy of their impulses. However, not all children develop at the same pace as their peers in this critical area.

If you have a child who exhibits any of the behaviors below, she or he could benefit from some behavioral interventions:

- Has trouble controlling verbal impulsiveness (talking excessively, interrupting)
- Has trouble controlling physical impulsiveness (grabbing, pushing, hitting)
- Runs off in stores or other settings
- Has problems doing homework

Here are a few interventions that may help.

When she talks too much or interrupts, try this:

- Teach rules she can apply in a variety of settings. For example, "When you walk into a room or join a group, first listen to see what they're talking about. Then you can add a brief comment on the same topic."
- Offer a visual cue, such as holding up a hand traffic cop style, to indicate no talking. In a classroom, post and point to a picture of an ear, indicating "no interrupting."
- Use rewards to reinforce successful behavior. For example, if she has played quietly while you were on the phone, respond immediately by offering to play a game with her.

When he can't stop from grabbing, pushing, or hitting, try this:

- Stop the action and do a retake: "Whoa, it's not okay to hurt people. No hitting. I can see that you're angry. You can say, 'I'm mad,' and stomp your foot. Let me hear you say that."
- Clearly lay out expectations. For example, "Jack and Susan, you will each have a turn with the new pool toy. Ten minutes each. I'll use my watch to keep track of your turn."
- Create a diversion. To keep a child from grabbing toy pieces, for example, as you lay them out for a game, tell him to hold on to the edge of the table while you lay out the game, and then reward him when you're done.

When she can't control a negative or irritating behavior, try this:

- Provide a kinesthetic "fidget" toy. Find objects that have texture, are bendy, or have other interesting qualities. "Here's a pipe cleaner to keep your hands busy while we're in line. You may not poke your brother."
- Plan in advance. If her restaurant behavior involves kicking under the table, seat her at the end, away from others, and tell her why you are doing so.
- Teach alternatives to the negative behavior. For example, if your child has a habit of running ahead of you in the supermarket, give her a job. Ask her to be your helper and mark off each grocery item on the list as you fill the cart.

* * * * *

Joyce Cooper-Kahn PhD and Laurie Dietzel PhD are highly esteemed clinical psychologists who specialize in learning and emotional challenges affecting children and their families. They are coauthors of *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* (Woodbine House). You can find out more about their book at www.latelostandunprepared.com.