

Parenting Tips
Trempealeau County Promoting Safe and Stable Families
By
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Learning Self-Control or Self-Regulation

John comes bursting into the playroom and sees his two cousins having a great time building a Lego city. He instantly picks up a pail of Legos and runs through the middle of the Lego city, destroying several of the tall structures. The two cousins both cry out, "Not you again. Stop wrecking our stuff." John returns and dumps a pail of Legos over the rest of their city.

What's your first reaction? Is it possible that John really wants to play with his cousins, but isn't able to regulate his emotions? What can be done to manage this situation?

Self-regulation is the ability to control urges and behave in a socially appropriate manner in order to reach a goal or complete a task. In the above situation, John has not developed this important life milestone. Without it, he will have a very hard time learning in school, making friends, or getting along with people in general.

Children are all unique. Some children are born with the brain and body chemistry that allows them to self-regulate easily. Other children have the physiological make-up where the response to outside stimuli is like a flash flood, nearly uncontrollable. Children who are flooded by high emotions can learn ways to sand-bag and manage the storm.

Teaching self-regulation is not learned through punishment or by shaming the child into compliance. It is learned gradually as the child learns to recognize and understand his body cues to the distress of unmet needs such as hunger, sleep, thirst, and attention. The child that has these needs met by caring adults in infancy learns that his needs will be met and gradually learns to delay his need for immediate response. For example, the one-year old can be soothed to wait a few moments for either food or drink. As time goes on, the intervals between the "need" signal and the "response" action become longer (delayed gratification).

By the time children are 3 ½ years-old, signs of delaying immediate gratification should be evident. Tips to help develop self-regulation skills include:

- Let the child see adults maintain self-control. Talk through everyday situations. (Example: "I'm really hungry tonight, but first we've got to start the grill to make the burgers. While I do that, go help Mom make salad. It will take a while, but will those burgers taste great!")
- Provide structure and predictability. Children who are intense need time to change activities. Prepare them for the change. (Example: "In 15 minutes, it will be bedtime. You've got 15 minutes to finish playing that game.")
- Redirect the child as soon as you see a problem brewing.
- Keep apart children who are not capable of self control. Pairing such children escalates the problem.
- Gradually expect children to wait a bit longer. (Example: Make it a game to delay response time. Have the child watch a 3-minute timer or clock instead of the instant response. "Give me three minutes to get that snack for you. Here let's set the timer." Thank the child for waiting quietly. As time goes on extend the times and find other ways to measure the time.)
- Play games such as *Red Light, Green Light* or sing the *B-I-N-G-O Clapping Song*. The quick changes in action help the part of the brain develop that controls self-regulation.

If you would like the game directions or words to the clapping song, go to <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/pp/> and click on **Development** and then click on **Self-Regulation**. You may also request this information by contacting Cyndy Jacoby, Trempealeau County UW-Extension Family Living Program, PO BOX 67, Whitehall, WI 54773. Phone: 715 - 538-2311, Ext. 209 or toll free 1-877-538-2311, Ext. 209. Email: cindy.jacoby@ces.uwex.edu



Family Living Program

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