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### Background

Most adults have little difficulty identifying children who have poor self-control. They tend to be disruptive, impulsive, interrupt others who are speaking, and are disorganized and off-task most of the time. However, when teachers and parents are asked to identify the characteristics associated with self-control that they would like to see their children or students exhibit, little agreement is found (Boren, Weir, & Benegar, 1987).

Self-control has been defined as "specific skills or sets of behavior needed in order to maintain goal-directed behavior" (Rosenbaum & Baker, 1984). There are two aspects of this definition that have promise for parents and educators. First, behaviors are observable and if we can see it we can change it. Second, children's environments can be modified to increase the probability of new, or desired, behavior occurring.

### Development

The development of self-control can be broken into four stages according to Mischel and Mischel (1983). However, these stages will occur at different age levels, because they vary and are influenced by a child's motivation, the environment, and the adults in that environment.

The first stage occurs when children begin to decrease their dependence on adults and explore their environment in an increasingly independent manner, typically during the preschool years. During this phase of development the child is typically distractible, tends to daydream, and needs adult modeling of problem-solving strategies. Adults should provide modeling of desired behaviors, opportunities for practice of the behavior by the child, and rewards for successive approximations of the behavior. Through this process the child becomes aware of daily routines and mimics taught behaviors and routines.

The second stage in the development of self-control requires children to remember routines when directed by an adult and delay impulsive behaviors until the completion of the routine. Children in this stage are beginning to develop problem-solving and organizational skills, although they still require adult prompting. Parents and teachers should provide opportunities for children to practice these skills and consistently reward good behavior. At the end of this stage children should have mastered daily routines and begin to predict adult expectations and appropriate behavior.

During the third stage, children initiate daily routines without prompting by adults, are organized and able to work independently, and are capable of delaying impulsive or off-task behavior. Adults must still evaluate problem-solving strategies selected by the child and provide consistent feedback for desirable and undesirable behavior. During this time, children begin to internalize and understand adult expectations. The fourth and final stage in the development of self-control begins when the child is able to internalize the behaviors expected of him/her and transfers those behaviors across situations. The child is also capable of determining whether his/her behavior was appropriate in a given situation. The role of the adult in this phase of development is to provide the child with guidance and encouragement as he or she learns.

### Causes of Lack of Self-Control

Just as self-control may be defined in many ways, dependent upon the situation and the expectations associated with it, the causes for the lack of self-control are also varied. Researchers agree that the causes for lack of self-control in children are many.

One possible cause for off-task or impulsive behavior in children is attention deficit disorder. Attention deficit disorder (ADD) impairs a child's ability to concentrate on a task, or item, for as long as would be expected for a child of his/her age group (Rosenbaum & Drabman, 1979).

Another possible factor is lack of consistency in the child's environment. Children must be taught the skills necessary to exhibit self-control. Parents and teachers must be consistent in their behavioral expectations. It is confusing to a child, who is trying to learn rules for appropriate behavior, when it is acceptable to perform a behavior on one occasion and not on another.

Withdrawn or dependent children, although usually not a problem in the classroom, may fail to develop the skills necessary for independent decision making. These children may appear unmotivated when presented with a challenge or something new.

### What Can I Do As A Parent?

The following suggestions may be helpful for parents of children who tend to be impulsive or distractible:

- Be consistent. If a behavior is unacceptable then it should be unacceptable all of the time. Do not allow the child to behave in unacceptable ways if you are busy or tired, as it will only hurt in the long run.

- If your child has done something wrong, try to explain to him/her why the action was wrong and what the expectations for his/her behavior are in that situation.
- Provide the child with a plan for problem-solving to ensure that she or he has the skills to determine for herself or himself whether a behavior is appropriate.
- Model appropriate behavior for your children and, if necessary, verbalize your thoughts to help your child understand what you are telling yourself as you make decisions.
- Provide consistent praise and rewards for appropriate behavior.
- Focus on positive behaviors and rewards for those behaviors rather than punishment for undesirable behavior.

### What Can I Do As A Teacher?

The following suggestions may be useful for teachers who have impulsive or distractible students in their classrooms:

- Make sure classroom rules are posted and understood by the students.
- Be consistent in your enforcement of the rules.
- Help the student to name behavior, choose alternative solutions, and plan and take relevant consequences (Verble, 1985).
- Be patient and always explain to the student what he or she has done wrong and what the acceptable behavior in that situation would be (Chrystal, 1988).
- Model the acceptable behavior for the student and have him/her practice the behavior.
- Provide feedback on the correctness of the response and, if necessary, practice again.
- Provide the student with praise for acceptable behavior.
- Make use of the other students in your class by rewarding the class for appropriate behavior from all students. The students who are able to self-control will pressure those who are not and with time impulsive students will learn to control their own behavior.
- Token economies, or point systems, which state very specifically which behaviors will be rewarded and which behaviors will result in a fine have been shown to be effective in increasing self-controlling behavior in impulsive students (Anderson, Fodor, & Alpert, 1976).
- In any intervention used, it is important to teach the impulsive student to evaluate his/her performance. Self-evaluation will allow the student to modify unacceptable responses. It is also very important to ensure the generalization of training to other settings (Epstein & Goss, 1978).
- Communicate with home by using a daily note to let parents know how the child behaved in school during the day. One method that has been effective is a small sheet with three faces, one smiling face, one flat face, and one frowning face. You can simply highlight the appropriate face for a good, fair, or bad day. Ongoing communication between home and school is very important so that all of those involved with the child can be consistent and aware of progress or setbacks.

### Resources

If classwide interventions are not successful, or problems at home persist, contact your school psychologist for more individual intervention strategies.

### References

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