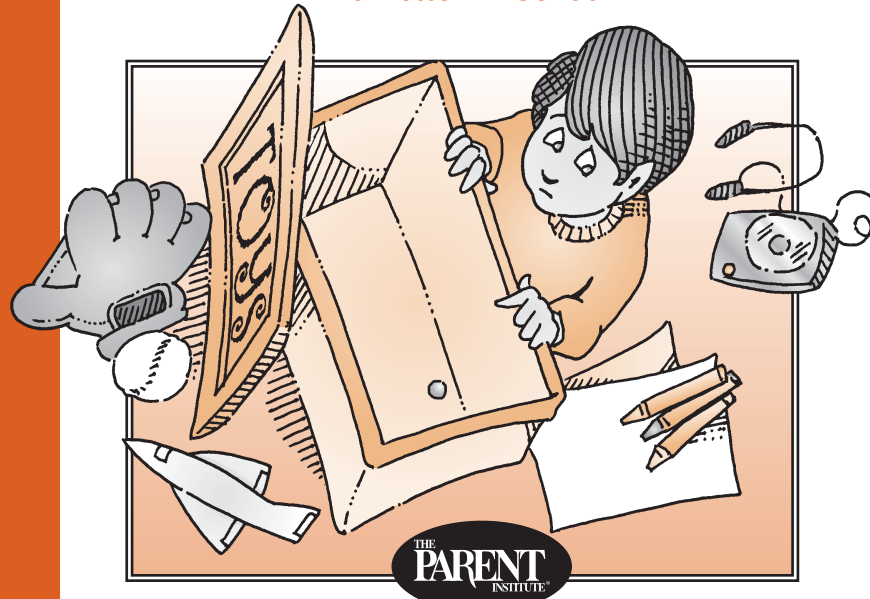


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HELPING CHILDREN LEARN SELF-DISCIPLINE

Ways Parents Can Help Their Children
Do Better in School



THE PARENT INSTITUTE

One of a Series of Booklets for Parents

T H E • D I S C I P L I N E • S E R I E S

Self-Discipline: The Passport to Success



Year after year, parents and teachers rank discipline as a major problem for schools and students.

People often think of discipline as parents and teachers laying down the law—teaching children to mind and show respect. But the most effective kind of discipline is *self-discipline*.

A child who is self-disciplined is motivated from the inside. He* does what's right even when no one is there to tell him to. He can control his own behavior.

Self-disciplined children do better in school—and in life. They are organized and persistent. They assume responsibility for their own learning. They can set aside short-term interests to achieve long-term goals. Children with self-control are also more likely to get along with others. However, because they're self-directed, they are less likely to give in to the negative influences of peers.

Schools work hard to teach students self-discipline, but the most effective lessons a child will ever learn are learned at home.

This booklet is full of ideas you can use at home to teach your child the skills and attitudes he will need to become a self-disciplined person ready to succeed at school!

Tip: *Don't expect to put all the ideas in this booklet into practice right away. The best way to make parenting changes is gradually. Focus on one or two ideas at a time—and don't forget to celebrate progress!*

**Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun.*

We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.

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Set the Stage for Self-Discipline

Self-discipline develops over time. When children are young, they don't know how to control themselves. Parents must impose discipline to teach them how. But the goal of discipline should be to help the child rely *less* on parental discipline and *more* on self-discipline.

Here are some ways you can set the stage for self-discipline:

- 1. Set an example.** What parents *do* speaks louder than anything they ever *tell* children. Do you show self-discipline? Do you set goals and work toward them? Do you face problems head-on? Do you get to work on time? Do you control your emotions?
- 2. Create a caring, supportive atmosphere.** Children need to feel loved and secure. Children can't learn self-discipline if they are afraid to make mistakes or to have an opinion that differs from yours.
- 3. Tell your child what you expect.** Your child wants to meet your expectations. Tell her how you want her to behave and why. Say you expect her to do her best in school. Challenge her to reach her full potential.
- 4. Be clear about family standards of right and wrong.** Self-disciplined children have a clear sense of right and wrong. Talk about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Talk about the importance of education. Talk about the values you expect your child to have.
- 5. Teach your child through guidance, not punishment.** Children learn best when they feel they are partners in the learning process—not opponents.



Does your discipline style say to your child, "We are a team. I am the leader and it's my job to help you grow up"? Or is it a "me against you" approach? Can your child question authority and the traditional way of doing things? Or is your way the only way?

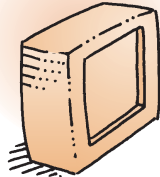
Use Four Basic Steps to Build Self-Discipline

1. Set Clear and Consistent Limits

Before they learn to set limits for themselves, children need parents to set limits for them—such as rules about TV, homework, bedtime and picking up belongings at the end of the day.

As children become older and more responsible, the limits can be relaxed, but only as children *earn* the increased freedom, and only if they know what the limits are. Involving your child in developing limits teaches him how to set them for himself.

Once limits are set, be prepared for your child to test them—that's how he learns what the limits *really* are. That's why it is important to be consistent in enforcing the limits you set. Unless the limits stay the same, and you enforce them the same way each time, your child can't be sure what the limits are.



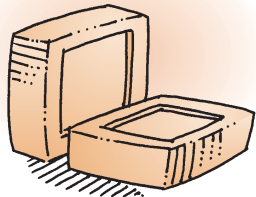
2. Give Your Child Responsibilities

Giving children responsibilities prepares them to take responsibility for themselves—an important part of self-discipline.

The key is knowing what responsibilities to give children and when—and then actually handing the responsibilities over to them. One way to do this is to make a checklist of who is responsible for what.

Sit with your child and decide which responsibilities she's ready to handle on her own. Getting up and going to bed on time? Preparing breakfast? Care and choice of clothing? Homework? Keeping her room clean? Vacuuming? Solving conflicts with her brother?

Once you have reached an agreement on who is responsible for what, stick to it. Remember: As long as you are reminding and nagging about a responsibility—or even doing it sometimes for your child—you are still assuming that responsibility!



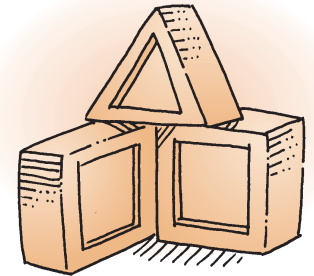
3. Give Your Child Choices

A self-disciplined child can make a responsible choice by himself after thinking about his options and the consequences. The best way to teach your child to make good choices is by giving him lots of practice.

When your child is young, give him a limited number of choices. Start with two options at a time: "Do you want to wear your jeans or your sweatpants?"

As your child gets older, the goal is for him to be able to make "free" choices—with no assistance from you. Frequently asking your child, "Do you want ... ?" helps as he practices making choices. It shows you love and respect him enough to trust his decisions.

You can help your child become more aware of his choices by asking questions: What did you choose to do? Is what you are doing getting you what you want? If you keep doing what you're doing, will the situation get better or worse? What other options do you have?



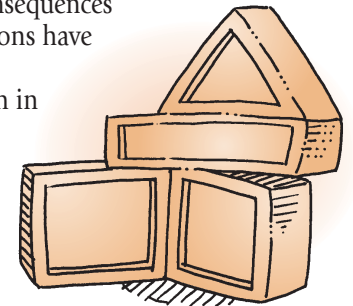
4. Let Your Child Experience Consequences

You can make sure your child experiences the consequences of her actions. That's how children learn that actions have consequences—both good and bad.

Knowing the consequences of a possible action in advance, and learning to weigh the consequences ("Will this be worth it?" for example) will help your child learn self-discipline.

When possible, let your child experience the natural consequences of her decisions. Natural consequences mean you do nothing at all—the consequence just happens. The natural consequence of not getting enough sleep is feeling tired the next day. A child who has experienced being tired may be more willing to go to bed on time.

You can also set up logical consequences. For example: If your child misses dinner, then she has to make her own. Or if she writes on the wall, she must clean it up.



Encourage Self-Discipline With Positive Reinforcement

Talk to Your Child

Teachers have found that talking with students to compliment them and reinforce the good things they do is one of the best ways to foster self-discipline.

Informal talks—anytime except when your child has misbehaved—will work for you, too. Dinner time is prime time. Work—and talk—together in the kitchen before the meal. Linger at the table and clean up together.

Turn bedside stories into bedside chats. When the lights are out, even children who are noncommunicative by day may open up. And they'll be more open to constructive criticism.

Or use car time. Many parents find car time is a great time to talk with children—uninterrupted.



Build Your Child's Self-Esteem

Children who feel loved feel capable. They are able to give much more to life—and get much more out of it. To boost your child's self-esteem, experts say:

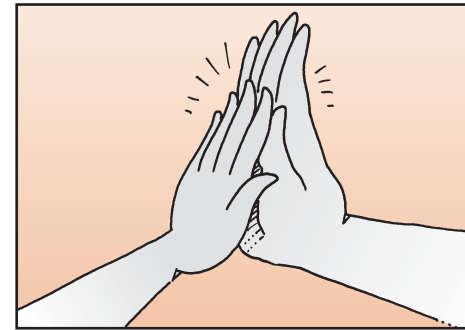
- **Tell your child that you love her** and think she's special. Express this frequently in words and deeds. Don't assume she's too old. And don't assume she knows.
- **Help your child develop a sense of meaning and purpose.** Talk about her dreams and goals. Tell her you need and appreciate her help. Ask her to help others. Tutoring a younger child or reading to a senior citizen, for example, can help a child feel important.
- **Show respect.** Ask your child's opinion. Knock on her bedroom door before entering.

Try Incentives and Rewards

Sometimes a reward—a movie, money, a treat or privilege—can entice a child to do something until he develops the inner drive to do it for himself.

Try promising your child something he likes to perk up his interest, to get him to try something new, or to encourage good behavior. But don't misuse rewards. Rewards should only reinforce good behavior. Don't use a reward to stop bad behavior. That's a bribe, and bribes quickly confuse children.

And don't reward your child for everything. That will leave him with the impression that people should work only for rewards—and not for the pride of doing a job well.



Here are some reward ideas that work:

- **Reward with praise.** Be specific and comment on effort as well as big and small accomplishments. When your child walks the dog, say, "I appreciate that you met your responsibility without being asked." Or, "It's wonderful how much effort you put into your science project. It really shows."
- **Celebrate a job well done.** When your child finishes a big job or project, go out for a sundae or pizza. Go to the zoo together or do something else your child chooses.
- **Show interest in schoolwork.** Read the papers your child writes for school. Ask to see artwork and problems he's solved. Talk about them and send copies of the best ones to a relative. Hang up "best work" for all to see. Simply knowing that you are interested in his work, knowing that you have noticed—and are pleased by—his work is a powerful reward and an incentive to keep working hard.

Teach Your Child Self-Management Skills

You can help your child develop many important self-management skills at home. Each skill is an important step toward becoming a self-disciplined person.

Self-Awareness

Give your child a list of behaviors and have her rate herself on a scale of 1 to 5. For example:

- I express ideas calmly.
- I complete my work on time, without being nagged.
- I'm willing to try new things.
- I take responsibility for my decisions.
- I do my share around the house.
- I say what I believe and do as I say.
- I don't hit other people to solve problems.
- I apologize when I'm wrong.

Talk about the results with your child to see if your perceptions differ.



Self-Care

- **Introduce the "Head-to-Toe" routine.** If your child constantly forgets his hat or his homework, teach him to run through a list before he runs out the door: "My hat's on my head, my coat's on my body, my gloves are on my hands, my shoes are on my feet, and my backpack's on my back."
- **Give your child an alarm clock,** so he can take the responsibility for getting himself up in the morning.
- **Mount an outside thermometer** where your child can see it from inside. Teach him how to read it, so he can make his own decisions about what to wear for the day.

Self-Control

Help your child see the connection between her feelings, her actions and outcomes. When your child has an argument or gets into trouble, ask: "What were you feeling?" "What did you do?" "What happened to you?" Help your child learn to control what she does when she's angry, instead of just doing what the anger "makes" her do.

Persistence

Self-discipline is hard work. You have to keep at it. Tell your child, "You're never a failure until you give up." "Stick with it. You're going to make it."

Talk about a time when you almost gave up, but didn't, and overcame an obstacle. Work crossword puzzles together, or do a jigsaw puzzle—and don't quit until you're finished.

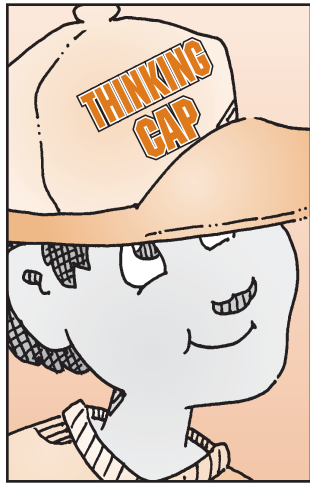
Personal Organization Skills

Have a place for everything. Summer clothes, winter clothes, folded clothes and dirty clothes. Shoes, gloves and hats. Toys and books. Trash. A place to study. A place for school papers, pens and pencils, and other school supplies.

Encourage your child to decide the best place for each item. Label everything for easy access.

Give your child a backpack with a pouch for notes from the teacher, and folders for completed work. Put a "school stuff" box by the door where he can put his backpack—and anything else he needs for the next day. Help your student organize his time. A weekly assignment book can help him keep track of what's due when. Provide a small notebook on which your child can make his own "to-do" lists.





Good Judgment

- **Teach your child to set priorities.** There isn't enough time to do everything. Children have to make choices. Otherwise, they'll be unable to manage themselves. As your child makes a "to-do" list, try asking, "What's the most important thing you have to do today?" Then suggest he do that first.
- **Help your child learn from mistakes.** When your child goofs, don't point out his mistake or talk about what he did wrong. Ask questions like, "What did you learn from this situation?" "What would you do differently next time?"

Talk about how failing at a few things doesn't make a person a failure. Then read about people who failed, yet went on to make outstanding contributions—Jonas Salk, Thomas Edison and George Washington Carver.

- **Ask "think" questions.** "Why do you think this happened?" "What do you think would happen if ... ?" "Why do you think she did that?" "What do you think about ... ?" Then really listen to the answers.

Problem-Solving Skills

- **Try solving problems as a family.** Give each family member some blank index cards. Have them write a household problem on each card. Shuffle the cards and read them one by one. Brainstorm together and have someone write down possible solutions. Evaluate the pros and cons of each solution. Then reach an agreement on the best ones. Reshuffle the cards and go on to the next problem.
- **Let your child handle her own problems.** When she comes to you with a problem, acknowledge it and ask, "What can we do about it?" Your child will usually have a good answer. Or suggest outright that your child fend for herself. With a little coaching on what to say and do, your child can learn a powerful lesson—she can solve problems herself.

Goal Setting

Talk with your child about the importance of goals. If children have a vision of where they want to go, they're more likely to get there. Goals make it easier to say "no" to irresponsible behavior and "yes" to a vision of the future.

Talk to your child about the importance of making small sacrifices to reach his goals. That geometry class is more bearable if your teen knows it's required for college admission.

Start with short-term goals, using these steps:

1. **Help your child identify one challenging—but attainable—goal** at the beginning of the week. It might be turning in a book report on time, or getting 90 percent correct on a spelling test. Or your child might want to work on changing a bad habit.
2. **Have your child post the goal.** A visual reminder will help keep your child motivated.
3. **Talk about how to accomplish the goal.** Help your child break the goal down into smaller steps. For example, "Read two chapters on Monday. Finish the book by Tuesday. Write the report on Wednesday. Revise it on Thursday."
4. **Ask how things are going as the week progresses.** If problems come up, talk about possible solutions. If your child falls behind in reading, for example, a 10-minute extension of bedtime might help him catch up.
5. **Help your child evaluate how well he did** at the end of the week. Did he achieve his goal? Why or why not?

Most importantly, praise your child for trying. Then have your child set another achievable goal for next week. Every time your child reaches a goal, he's building his self-esteem and his ability to reach another one.

Use the same kind of goal-setting process to help your child make his long-term goals and dreams come true.



Promote Activities to Build Self-Discipline

One way you can help your child practice self-discipline is by encouraging her to participate in a variety of activities, both in and out of school. Here are some of the best:

Extracurricular Activities

After-school drama, athletics, music, service, language, scouts and other clubs give kids a chance to try new skills and receive recognition for a job well done.

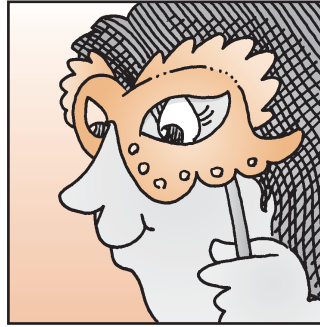
Make sure your child chooses activities that interest her—not you. Praise what your child does well. Ignore the rest.

Don't let your child quit an activity when she's in a "slump." If her enthusiasm has waned, or she's stressed over an upcoming recital, help her keep going. A change in music or practice time, or just listening to her complaints, can help. Wait until she gets over that hurdle. Then sit down and talk about her lessons and whether she wants to continue.

Hobbies

Even if you're not interested in stamp collecting, sewing or the latest adventures of Superman, encourage your child's interest. Let him know you admire his dedication and interest in learning new things. Show interest in your child's hobbies, but don't take over.

Don't overload your child with too much equipment when he takes an interest in something new. If he starts a bug or rock collection, don't rush out and buy an expensive kit. Supply a few needed items to get him started. Then if he takes care of those things and continues his interest, you can supply more.



Caring for Pets

Pets are fun, but serious business. As children feed, water and exercise a pet every day, they learn self-discipline along with how to respect and take care of something they love. If possible, involve your child in choosing the best pet for your family. Will the pet be suited for your home? Your budget? Will your child have the skills and enough time to take care of this kind of pet?

Make a contract with your child. Specify what she will do for the pet, as well as the consequences if she doesn't do it. Then have her sign it.

Money Management

Learning how to budget, manage and invest money is a great way to build self-discipline. Children can start learning about money as early as age three, but they are never too old to start. The need for responsible money management never ends.

Show your child how you budget the family money. Here's an example:

- **Spending.** For groceries, monthly bills, etc.
- **Saving.** For meeting long-term needs and wants—like money for college tuition, a family car or vacation.
- **Giving.** For donations to organizations or charities.

Talk to your child about your family budget. The next time you pay the bills, ask your child to help.

Talk about priorities: What's most important to your family and how is this reflected in your finances?

Ask your child to suggest future priorities. Get a cat? Take a trip? How might the family save for them? Would using less electricity help, for example? Should you start a "rainy day" account?



Help Your Child Make Self-Discipline a Habit

Good habits make self-discipline easier. Habits are automatic actions that take no conscious thought. You probably don't think about what you do first thing in the morning. Brushing your teeth and taking a shower are habits you've developed over the years. You can help your child make self-discipline a habit, too.

Developing good habits is as easy as 1-2-3:

1. **Make sure your child wants to be involved.** Talk about how positive habits can make life easier and more pleasant.
2. **Pick only a few habits to develop at a time.** There are many habits that build self-discipline—reading every day, taking notes in class, studying at the same time every day. Sit down with your child and agree on a list of habits that will help develop self-discipline.
3. **Allow 21 days.** Experts have discovered that if you repeat an action every day for 21 days, it is likely to become automatic. So for the next 21 days, help your children work on new habits. After that, your child will be on the way to self-discipline.

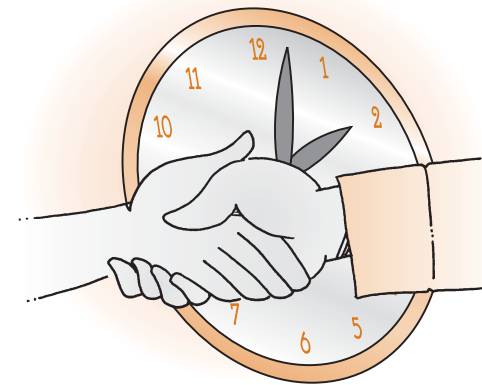


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A Final Word

It takes time for children to understand the value of self-control *versus* control that's imposed by adults. And it takes time for parents to be consistent in implementing the ideas in this booklet.

But it's worth the effort. If you take it one step at a time, and if you're patient and persistent, you will watch your child grow into a happy, self-disciplined adult—ready and able to tackle life's challenges.



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