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Counselor's Corner
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Impulse Control Techniques That Work for Children

A lack of impulse control is at the root of many behavior problems. The more impulse control your child gains, the less likely he'll be to grab things out of your hand, and he'll be more likely to think twice about accepting that dare from a friend.

Teach your child to label feelings

Kids who don't understand their emotions are more likely to be impulsive. A child who can't say, "I'm angry" may hit to show she's upset. Or a child who can't verbalize, "I feel sad," may throw herself to the floor and scream. Teach your child to recognize her feelings so she can tell you, rather than show you, how she feels. Start by teaching your child to label emotions, like angry, sad, or scared. Then, talk about the difference between feelings and behavior.

Ask your child to repeat the directions

Sometimes, kids behave impulsively because they don't listen to directions. Before you've finished your instructions, they are sprinting into action without any idea what you said. Teach your child to listen to directions by asking him to repeat your instructions before he acts. Ask, "OK, what did I just tell you to do?" When he can correctly repeat back what you said—whether it's clean his room or put his homework in his backpack—let him act. You may need to start your instructions by saying, "Before you move, I want you to explain the directions back to me."

Teach problem-solving techniques

Although brainstorming solutions sounds simple, problem-solving can be one of the most effective impulse control techniques. Teach your child there is more than one way to solve a problem. And it's important to evaluate several potential solutions before springing into action. So, whether your child is trying to fix the chain on her bicycle, or she can't figure out her math problem, encourage her to find five potential solutions before acting. After identifying possible solutions, help her evaluate which solution is most likely to be effective. With practice, she can get used to thinking before she acts.

Teach anger management skills

Low frustration tolerance may cause impulsive outbursts. Teach your child how to manage his anger so he can deal with his emotions in a healthy way. Show him specific strategies, like taking a few deep breaths or walking around the house to burn off some energy. You can even create a calm-down kit filled with tools that will help him relax.

Provide structure and be consistent

Keep your discipline consistent. Offer reminders like, "You need to hold my hand in the parking lot when we get out of the car," each time you go to the store. With enough practice, your child will grow accustomed to your rules and the consequences for breaking them. Whenever possible, keep your child's routine the same. Less chaos can also reduce impulsive behavior.

Practice delayed gratification

Kids need opportunities to practice delaying gratification. Make delayed gratification fun by creating a reward system. A token economy system can be a fun way to do this. Reward your child's good behavior with tokens. Then, allow him to exchange tokens for bigger rewards, like a trip to the park. Create small incentives that only require one or two tokens as well as big rewards, that require 20 tokens. Then, encourage him to save up his tokens for bigger ticket items, like going to the movies. Saving up for bigger rewards will help him practice delaying gratification. That's an essential skill that will help him resist temptations that may lead to impulsive choices.

Be a good role model

Your child will learn a lot about impulse control by watching you. Model appropriate ways to wait patiently and tolerate delayed gratification. Point out impulse control techniques that you're using by saying things like, "I'd really like to buy that new laptop but I'm going to save my money for our vacation next summer." Researchers at the University of Toronto found that self-talk plays a major role in helping kids manage their impulsive behavior. Role model healthy self-talk by saying things like, "This is a long line, but we have to wait patiently for our turn." Talking to yourself out loud will teach your child how to develop an internal dialogue that will help him manage his impulses.

Encourage plenty of physical activity

Encourage your child to play outside and ensure that she gets plenty of exercise. A child who has had an opportunity to run, jump, and climb will be better equipped to be more self-disciplined. Limit your child's screen time and encourage her to play outside whenever possible. Look for opportunities to play outdoor games together as well. Tossing a ball, playing hopscotch, or playing tag will get some energy out.