

# *Helping Children Learn* **Self-Discipline**



*Ways Families Can Help Their  
Children Do Better in School*



# Self-Discipline: The Passport to Success

**Y**ear after year, families and teachers rank discipline as a major challenge for schools and students.

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

Children who are self-disciplined are motivated from the inside. They do what's right even when no one is there to tell them to. They can control their own behavior.

Self-disciplined children do better in school—and in life. They are reliable 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 negative influences of peers.

Schools work hard to teach students self-discipline, but the most effective lessons a child will ever learn take place at home. This booklet is full of ideas you can use to teach your child the skills and attitudes needed to become a self-disciplined person ready to succeed!

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

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# Set the Stage for Self-Discipline

**S**elf-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 children rely *less* on parental discipline and *more* on self-discipline.

Here are some ways to 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 live up to commitments? Do you control your emotions?
- 2. Create a caring, supportive atmosphere.** Children need to feel loved and secure. They can't learn self-discipline if they are afraid to make mistakes or to have an opinion that differs from yours.
- 3. Establish expectations.** Children want to meet their families' expectations. Tell your child what behavior you expect and why. Say you expect your student's best effort in school. Encourage your child to realize 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 your family's values.
- 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, "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 recreational screen use, schoolwork, bedtime and picking up belongings at the end of the day.

As children become older and more responsible, the rules can be relaxed, but only as children *earn* the increased freedom. Involving children in developing limits teaches them how to set them for themselves.

Once limits are set, be prepared for your child to test them—that's how kids learn what the rules *really* are. That's why it is important to be consistent. 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.

Together, talk about which responsibilities your child is ready to handle independently. *Getting up and going to bed on time? Preparing breakfast? Care and choice of clothing? Homework? Keeping a clean bedroom? Vacuuming? Solving conflicts with siblings?*

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 after thinking about options and consequences. The best way to teach your child to make appropriate choices is by providing lots of opportunities to practice.

When your child is young, offer 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 to be able to make “free” choices—with no assistance from you. Asking what your child wants shows you trust your student to make responsible decisions.

You can help your child reflect on 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

When children experience the consequences of their actions, they learn that all choices have consequences—both good and bad.

Knowing the possible consequences of an action in advance, and learning to consider them before making a choice (“Will this be worth it?” for example) will help your child learn self-discipline.

When possible, let your child experience the natural consequences of 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 establish logical consequences. For example: *If you come in 10 minutes late, you will have to come in 10 minutes early tomorrow. If you write on the wall, you must clean it up.*

# Encourage Self-Discipline With Positive Reinforcement

## Talk to Your Child

Teachers have found that chatting with students—to compliment them and reinforce the positive 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. Dinnertime is prime time. Work and talk together in the kitchen before the meal. Linger at the table and clean up together.

Start a tradition of bedside chats. When the lights are out, even children who are noncommunicative by day may open up. And they'll be more open to feedback.

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

## Foster a Positive Self-Image

Children who feel loved feel capable. This gives them confidence to give much more to life—and get much more out of it. To encourage this feeling:

- **Express your love and respect for your child** frequently through words and deeds. Don't assume your child knows how you feel or is too old to be reminded.
- **Help your child develop a sense of meaning and purpose.** Talk about dreams and goals. Ask for your child's help and express your appreciation. Encourage your child to help others, too. Tutoring a younger child or reading to a senior citizen, for example, can help a child feel valued.
- **Show respect.** Ask your child's opinion. Knock before entering your child's bedroom.

## Recognize Effort and Progress

As your child makes progress toward becoming a self-disciplined person, make it clear you've noticed!

Here are some ideas that work:

- **Praise your child.** Be specific and comment on effort—as well as big and small accomplishments. When your child walks the dog, say, “I appreciate that you walked the dog without being asked.” Or, “It’s wonderful how much effort you put into your science project. It really shows.”
- **Use natural rewards.** Help your child see the connection between positive choices and positive consequences. If your child helps you clean up after dinner without being asked, point out that you now have time for an extra bedtime story.
- **Celebrate a job well done.** When your child finishes a big job or project, spend time together doing something your child chooses.
- **Show interest in schoolwork.** Read the papers your child writes for school. Ask to see artwork and solved math problems. 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 what your child is doing, knowing that you have noticed—and are pleased by—the work, is a powerful incentive to keep up the effort.



# 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 this list of behaviors. Ask, "On a scale of 1 to 5, how well does each statement describe you?"

- ☐ I express ideas calmly.
- ☐ I complete my work on time, without needing to be reminded.
- ☐ 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 compromise with others.
- ☐ I apologize when I'm wrong.

Talk about the results with your child. Do your perceptions differ?

## Self-Care

- **Introduce the Head-to-Toe routine.** If your child constantly relies on you to remember things, suggest running through this list before leaving the house: "My hat's on my head, my coat's on my body, my backpack's on my back, my gloves are on my hands and my shoes are on my feet."
- **Provide an alarm clock.** Your child can take responsibility for getting up in the morning.
- **Mount an outside thermometer** where your child can see it from inside. Explain how to read it, so your child can make decisions about what to wear for the day.



## Self-Control

Help your child see the connection between feelings, actions and outcomes. When your child has an argument or gets into trouble, ask: "What were you feeling?" "What did you do?" "What happened as a result?" Help your child learn that we can control what we do when we are angry, instead of just doing what the anger "makes" us do.

## Persistence

Self-discipline is hard work. You have to keep at it. Tell your child, "You haven't failed 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. Solve word or math puzzles together, or do a jigsaw puzzle—and don't quit until you're finished.

## Personal Organization

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

Encourage your child to decide the best place for each item. Use labels to make it clear what goes where.

Give your child a schoolbag with a pocket for notes from the teacher, and folders for completed work. Put a "school stuff" box by the door to hold everything your child needs for school the next day.

Help your child organize time. A weekly assignment book is helpful for keeping track of what's due when. Provide a small notebook in which your child can make daily "to-do" lists.



## Good Judgment

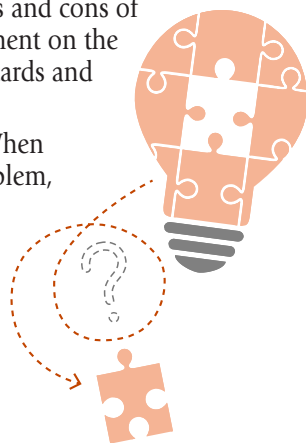
- **Teach your child to set priorities.** There isn't enough time to do everything. Children have to make choices. Otherwise, they'll be unable to manage themselves. As your child makes a "to-do" list, try asking, "What's the most important thing you have to do today?" Then suggest doing that first.
- **Help your child learn from mistakes.** When your child messes up, don't point out the mistake or place blame. 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 experienced failure at first yet went on to succeed, like Jonas Salk, Oprah Winfrey, Thomas Edison and George Washington Carver.

- **Ask thinking 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 your child's 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 remaining cards and go on to the next problem.
- **Let your child handle problems.** When your child comes to you with a problem, acknowledge it and ask, "What can we do about it?" Your child will usually have an answer. Or offer a little coaching. You'll teach a powerful lesson—your child can address problems independently.



## 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 make choices that will help them get there. Goals make it easier to say *no* to irresponsible behavior and *yes* to a vision of the future.

Talk about the importance of making small sacrifices to reach goals. It will be easier to stay self-disciplined about studying geometry if your child knows that astronauts use it every day.

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 report on time, or getting 90 percent correct on a spelling test. Or your child might want to work on changing a negative 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 be enough to catch up.
5. **Help your child evaluate progress** at the end of the week.  
Did your student achieve the goal? Why or why not?

Most importantly, offer praise for effort. Then have your child set another achievable goal for next week. Reaching each goal builds students' confidence in their ability to reach another one.

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

# Promote Activities to Build Self-Discipline

One way to promote self-discipline is by encouraging your child 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 and teams give kids a chance to develop self-discipline as they learn skills and receive recognition for a job well done.

The activities should be ones that interest your child—not just you. Praise what your child does well. Ignore the rest.

Don't let your child quit an activity due to a "slump." If enthusiasm wanes or your child is stressed over an upcoming recital or competition, brainstorm ways to keep going. A change in music or practice time, or just talking about struggles can help. When your child gets over the hurdle, sit down and talk about the activity and whether to continue.

## Hobbies

Even if you're not interested in card collecting, crocheting or the latest adventures of Superman, encourage your child's interest. Show that you admire your child's dedication and interest in learning new things. Express interest in your child's hobbies, but don't take over.

Don't invest in too much equipment when a new interest crops up. If your child starts a bug or rock collection, don't rush out and buy an expensive kit. Supply a few needed items to get started. Then if your child takes care of those things and continues to show interest, you can reward persistence by supplying more.

## Caring for Pets

Pets are fun, but they're also 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. Specify what your child will do for the pet, as well as the consequences if it's not done. Then have your child 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 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.

Explain 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

**G**ood 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 positive 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 evening. Sit down with your child and agree on a list of habits that will help promote self-discipline.
3. **Use reminders.** As your child gets used to a new habit, reminders like sticky notes or alarms are helpful. Your student can put a note on the fridge that says, "Study right after dinner." Soon, your child won't even think about leaving the table and turning on the TV.

# 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 families 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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