

Working on Self Control at Home with Your Temperamentally Intense Child

Temperamentally intense children and very active children sometimes have difficulties with impulsive and aggressive behaviors. Most children can tell you at a neutral time what behaviors are expected of them and will promise better behavior next time. But just as some children need extra support and skill building to learn to tie their shoes, ride a bike or read, some children need extra support to develop appropriate self control. Impulsive and aggressive behavior in young children is not about poor manners nor is it usually simply willful behavior. For many temperamentally intense and active children self control takes practice.

Your time at home is an opportunity for practice. Teachers and child care providers will not have as much time to devote to your child as you do and there will be more opportunity for frustration and conflict in a group of children. The following are some ideas for helping your child to develop the skills that he or she needs to be able to have a successful school and childcare experience and an easier time at home.

1. Develop a list of acceptable options your child can utilize when he or she is frustrated or mad. You can make a fun project out of this by having your child draw pictures or cut pictures from magazines. Create a book or chart of the choices you have agreed upon that he or she can refer to. Choices might include breaking down cardboard or milk cartons for recycling, tearing up paper, going outside, asking for help, taking deep breaths, blowing bubbles, kicking a ball, going to an area where screaming would be OK or leaving the area.
2. Help your child to plan ahead. Rehearse situations that you know may be difficult for your child to handle. Keep this simple and positive. Wonder out loud rather than putting your child on the hot seat by asking them direct questions. "Sam is going to get a lot of presents today at his party because he is the birthday boy. That will be fun for Sam but it might be kind of hard for the other kids. I wonder what kids could do if they are feeling mad or upset that they don't have presents?" Talking about 'kids' rather than your child in particular makes this a less threatening topic. Don't press your child to participate. Continue to speculate out loud. "I guess they could have a big loud tantrum. That might feel kind of good. I bet it wouldn't feel good for very long though. Hmm, maybe they could remember they have a birthday coming up, or remember the one they had. Maybe they could take some deep breaths. Maybe they could think about the cake they are going to be eating." Brainstorm out loud for a little while then suggest that your child pay attention to which of these responses seems to work for any of the kids at the party. Suggest that your child might want to try some of them. You can also do this while playing with dolls or action figures giving them the dialogue. *Incentives or consequences are seldom enough without extra support and skill building. Children who get out of control need practice at neutral times to help them learn skills they can draw from in difficult situations.*
3. If you are concerned that significant problems are likely to arise use a more direct variation of the example above. Tell your child specifically what behaviors are expected of him or her. Your idea of being 'helpful' or 'nice' is not likely to be the same as your child's ideas about those concepts so be sure to be specific about your expectations. "You need to hold my hand", "You need to come when I call you", "You will need to get out of the pool when the teacher tells you to", are all examples of being clear about your behavioral expectations. Be supportive, "I know that might be kind of tricky for you." And also be a bit of a cheerleader. "I know you can do it ___ (now that you are four, or five or like you did at school yesterday, etc). You might want to offer your child a small incentive such as a sticker or

token prize for being able to pull off desired behaviors if you plan for this ahead of time. If your child doesn't earn the reward be matter of fact about it being "too hard" for him or her to behave in the agreed upon way this time, but also plant the positive seed that you're sure it will be easier next time.

4. Give your child observational feedback. "You look pretty frustrated. You're starting to throw the legos". "You sure looked mad when your brother knocked over your blocks". This kind of feedback helps your child learn to become aware of how he or she is feeling, a skill needed to avoid impulsive reactions.
5. Active and intense kids are physical. Help them notice their bodies and provide acceptable outlets. "You are getting really revved up. It looks like your body needs to be outside for awhile." "You are getting too loud and wild for the library. It looks like we need to check out our books so you can race me to the car". Rainy weather provides a challenge in this regard. Unless your child is sick some time outside stomping in puddles may be well worth it for both of you. Alternately water play in the tub or at the sink or with cardboard boxes that don't need to be handled with care are other active indoor play choices.
6. Active intense kids often get into other people's space as they barrel along. They may be oblivious to consequences such as getting in trouble or having someone get upset with them. Notice this out loud for them. Make sure your tone is neutral and observational. "You were pretty upset when I tripped over your cars and messed up the line you were setting up. And I felt kind of upset about having to fold all the laundry again after you dove into the pile of folded clothes". Once again, be sure your tone is neutral and refrain from demanding a response. You are gently nudging your child in the direction of more self awareness and empathy.
7. The use of stories about other children who are out of control, upset or angry can be a safe way for your child to learn self control and better choices. Stories can also be a safe and easy way to talk about those issues. Make sure though that you avoid lecturing. You want to inspire new awareness, not a power struggle.
8. Help your child to become aware of what kinds of things upset him or her. "It seems like it's really hard for you to wait". "It's hard for you to share your toys". Etc. This will help you and your child plan for times when your child is at greater risk of losing control.
9. Help your child to become aware of what kinds of things help him or her to calm down. Does your child like to be held or left alone? If they like to be left alone do they want to let you know when they are ready for contact or would they like you to check in with them? Water play is often very calming. That might mean a bath, standing at the sink in the house. Outside a bucket of water and paint brush to 'paint' the house or a tub of water and toys will work. Blowing bubbles can also be very calming.
10. Have your child be the advisor or helper for a stuffed animal or younger child who is having similar difficulties. This will help your child pull out that capable part of themselves.
11. Playing simple games with your child such as Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders or Go Fish will help your child to learn patience and to share control. Make sure it's a fun experience. Don't get into a power struggle about the rules. Keep the game short if your child is easily frustrated by the experience. Bring your neutral observational self to this experience too. "Darn, I got sent back." "Sometimes you get the

card you want and sometimes not.” You are helping to give your child a perspective beyond the moment. If things don’t go his or her way one time they may another time.

12. Use drama and humor to help your child let go of upsets. When your child doesn’t get the prize they wanted from a gumball machine stomp your foot and say, ‘Darn! I was hoping you’d get the one you wanted. Gumball machine, didn’t you know that Sophie really wanted the ring?’ Be sensitive about this. You are not mocking your child; you are modeling another way to react.
13. Intense children often use strong language when they are upset or excited. Make sure you are clear about which words are acceptable and which are not. You might designate an area (such as the bathroom or the child’s bedroom) where he or she can speak freely. This approach reduces the potential for a power struggle over this issue. You can utilize humor and drama again. Get silly with your child and create some acceptable words together. Be stern and no nonsense about unacceptable language. Keep your response simple, don’t lecture. There should be no secondary gain (such as how upset you get) from using unacceptable language.
14. Don’t wait for your child to get too wound up. Provide periodic physical breaks. You might have your child bring mail to the mail box out front, throw the ball for the dog for awhile (the dog needs some exercise), etc. Enlisting your child’s help gives him or her a sense of importance and the breaks will help prevent your child’s energy from escalating to the out of control point.
15. Have your child practice behaviors necessary for something they are looking forward to, preschool, kindergarten, a birthday party, a play date, etc. You might set the timer for a short period of time and suggest that your child show you how they will need to act at the upcoming event. Keep this positive and fun. If your child loses control remind him or her that this is exactly what practice is for and that there will be another chance later that day or tomorrow which is sure to be easier.
16. Minimize your child’s time watching videos, TV and playing video games, especially when there is aggressive or violent content. Children tend to be more wound after TV or video games and learn from what they are exposed to so choose wisely and talk with your child about what they are watching.
17. Involve your child in projects that develop over time. Planting seeds in a pot indoors or in the ground outside will give your child the experience of delayed gratification and the satisfaction of taking the steps (planting and watering) required for the end result.
18. Develop bedtime rituals that allow your child time to wind down so that bedtime is not a battle zone. Finding the right balance for high energy kids can be a bit tricky. They may want to go and go and go but may also get too wound up and over stimulated without enough down time.
19. When your child is getting out of control and their energy is either unfocused or headed into problem behaviors, help give them a focus. This is the time to draw hopscotch squares outside, pound some nails in a board, get out a jump rope, or do some digging outside. If they are not too revved up you can give them a box of jars and lids that have become separated. Have them match the appropriate lids to their jars.
20. Help your child get involved in activities which involve plenty of energy but also require focus and self control. Some possibilities include swim lessons, gymnastics, dance lessons and playing with older children.