



# Building Blocks

## for Parents

### Children Who Have Trouble Controlling Their Impulses

Children who have trouble controlling their impulses can be rewarded for appropriate behavior and taught to control their actions. It's a gradual process. The first step is **preventative discipline**. You take over the job of controlling the child's impulses for him. This must be done by one teacher who assumes responsibility for keeping track of what the child is doing and helping him control those impulses. This teacher doesn't have to be with the child all the time — she can work with other children — but she must be free enough to be able to stop what she's doing and go to the child when he needs her. This requires a high teacher/child ratio or a special teacher, such as a trained student teacher or mother. The child must know he can rely on that person to help him at each difficult time. It's almost as if the teacher makes a contract with the child, promising him that she'll help him keep himself out of trouble.

When you see a problem situation on the horizon, step in and keep it from happening. Learn when problem situations are about to occur by watching the child, noticing what situations set him off and what signals he sends when he's about to have difficulty. A child might be set off when he's expected to share a toy he wants for himself. The signal might be a loud "No!" or a certain look in his eyes or a certain posture. When you see the signal, step in before he gets into trouble, if possible. If a problem does occur (a toy is broken, for example), physically remove him from the situation. If he really gets out of control, take him away from the group, but not out of the room, and stay with him until he calms down. While you want to be understanding, don't make his removal a rewarding situation by being too attentive.

The second step is **teaching the child to learn his own signals**. This may be the easiest step to accomplish. Tell the child, "You know, you seem to have problems whenever you have to give up something you want for yourself. That's when you hit someone or break something. When you think that's going to happen, call me and I'll help you." Try to be near enough to the child to get there in time. Also, check in with the child verbally now and again — "David, how are things going?" — so he knows you really care.

Third comes **giving the child back his own controls**. This must be done slowly so he doesn't feel you've abandoned him. Tell him, "Now for a few minutes, instead of calling me, you stop yourself from hitting. But you can call me if you really think you're going to need me to help." Keep praising him for doing well, and gradually encourage him to take more and more responsibility. Reassure him that he's not losing your friendship and will still get your attention after he learns to control his behavior. It won't work unless he's convinced it's really beneficial for him to take control himself.

And as we said, it's slow work. You won't succeed in a week or probably even in a month. It will take your energy, concern and dedication, but it will be worth all the effort you put into it when you see those self-controls beginning to work.

**Other hints** for working with the child who has trouble with controls:

- In general, the child needs more guidance and program structure than most others. You may actively have to keep the child involved in activities. When you see an activity breaking up, try to get the child out of it and into something else. When you lead him into a new activity, stay with him a while to make sure he gets involved. Check on his progress from time to time.
- Try to keep the impulsive child out of activities which are frustrating and may encourage destructive behavior (toys with lots of little pieces, activities which require a lot of sharing).

— continued on reverse —

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- Intersperse quiet activities with times when the child can let off steam (running, pounding clay, throwing bean bags).
- Have a minimum of toys within his reach that he can spill or break.
- At storytime, be sure the child is sitting where he can get involved and see the pictures.
- Serve him towards the beginning rather than the end of meals.

– *Sam Granato, Project Manager,*  
**Day Care: Serving Children With Special Needs,**  
*U.S. Department of Health, Education, & Welfare,*  
*Office of Child Development, 1972.*  
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