

You are here: Home / Social Emotional Learning / Self-Control: 50+Ways to Help Preschoolers Practice Self-Control

## Self-Control: 50+Ways to Help Preschoolers Practice Self-Control

Three year old Jessica is at the grocery store with her mom. While they are checking out, Jessica notices her favorite candy bar. "Mom can I have that?" asked a delighted Jessica. Her mom is hesitant, but eventually concedes. "Sure. But you'll have to wait until we get home to eat it."

At first Jessica seems fine with this compromise. However, when they get to the car, she asks for her candy. "Jessica, I told you not until we get home," her mother reminds her. Jessica is not thrilled. "Why can't I have it now!" she yells. Her mother calmly replies, "Because I told you that you have to wait."

Jessica starts to cry and refuses to get in her car seat. Through tears she screams "I want to eat it now!" As her mother tries to coax her into her car seat, Jessica continues to kick and scream.



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### What Is Self-Control?

If you've been to a grocery store, chances are you've witnessed similar meltdowns at the check-out line. Check-out lines are a nightmare for many parents. All the candy and toys call for young children to display self-control they haven't yet mastered.

Self-control is our ability to regulate our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in the face of temptations and impulses. It is a cognitive process that allows us to manage ourselves in order to achieve a specific goal.

For example, children who exhibit self-control can wait their turn when playing a game, can refrain from hitting others when they're mad, and can delay gratification.

## Why Is Self-Control Important?

Self-control is not a skill most preschool children have mastered. However, many Kindergarten teachers believe that it is a strong indicator of school readiness. After all, kids need self-control to be able to sit still, pay attention, follow directions, and control their impulses.

Self-control allows children to respond to stressful situations in productive ways. In the example above, if Jessica's self-control 'muscle' was more developed, she might not have thrown a temper tantrum in the car.

Research findings suggest that children with low self-control abilities are more prone to aggressive behaviors. They struggle to form and maintain meaningful relationships with peers, and are often at odds with authority figures.

## Benefits of Self-Control

Several studies indicate that children who are able to exhibit self-control in preschool experience more success in school and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors as adolescents. Additionally, in a study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, researchers found that children with high self-control are better able to:

- Pay attention
- Persist with difficult tasks
- Suppress inappropriate or impulsive behaviors

The findings also suggest that adults who displayed high self-control as children were more likely to find and retain employment in adulthood.

## Teaching Kids Self-Control

Teaching children self-control is one of the best ways that parents and care givers can prepare them for success. There are several games and activities that can help kids strengthen their self-control muscle. Let's take a look at a few. (This list is continually growing. It's helpful to bookmark this page to keep up to date!)

### Games That Teach Preschool Children Self-Control

Many of the ideas listed comes from a study conducted by Tominey & McClelland (2011) in *Early Education and Development* (Volume 22, Issue 3).

1. **Red Light, Green Light:** One child is the stoplight, the other children are the cars. When the stoplight yells "Green light!" the children run towards the stoplight. When the stoplight yells "Red light!" all the children must stop. If a child doesn't stop, they must go back to the starting line.

2. **Red Light, Green Light (with a twist):** Start playing the game the original way. Once kids get used to the original rules, reverse them so that "Red light!" means go and "Green light!" means freeze.
3. **Red Light, Purple Light:** This game follows the same concept as "red light, green light". First assign "go" and "stop" to colors other than red and green (i.e. purple and brown). Use construction paper as a visual. Alternate the "stop" and "go" colors. Once the children grow accustomed to the colors and their corresponding meaning, make changes so that children must once again regulate their responses.
4. **Loud or Quiet:** Children have to perform an action either loud or quiet. First, pick an action (i.e. stomp your feet. The leader says loud, and the children stomp loud. When the leader says "quiet, the kids stomp quietly.)
5. **Freeze Dance:** Kids dance when the music plays and freeze when it stops. Dance quickly for fast-tempo songs, slowly for slow-tempo songs. And then reverse the cues: Fast music = slow dancing. Slow music = fast dancing.
6. **Follow My Clap.** In this game the leader creates a clapping pattern. Children have to listen and repeat the pattern
7. **Color Matching Freeze:** In this version of the freeze game, kids don't just stop dancing when the music stops. First, they find a colored mat and stand on it. Then, before they freeze, they perform a special dance step. There are several, differently-colored mats on the floor, and each color is linked with a different dance step.
8. **Conducting an Orchestra:** Musical instruments needed. The teacher will have a long stick or ruler and will act like an orchestra leader, conducting when they will play their instruments. The teacher will wave the conductor's wand quickly or slowly and have students play according to their movements. Then, the teacher will have students override their automatic response by indicating that students should play slowly when she waves the conductors wand quickly, and vice versa.
9. **Drum Beats:** A teacher tells kids to respond to different drum cues with specific body movements. For example, kids might hop when they hear a fast drum beat and crawl when they hear a slow drum beat. After a while, kids are asked to reverse the cues.
10. **Red Rover:** in this classic game two teams line up opposite of each other, no more than 30 feet apart. The first team agrees to call one player from the opposite team, and chants, "Red Rover Red Rover, send (player's name) over!" The person called runs to the other line and tries to break the chain (formed by linking hands.)
11. **Dance Party!**

The teacher puts on some fun music and then starts to dance. The students have to follow her dance routine exactly, no matter how silly. After 30 seconds or so the teacher calls out a student's name. That student begins to make up his own dance moves that the rest of the class must follow. The teacher then becomes the judge. Any student she catches not doing the moves exactly has to sit down. Each student should get thirty seconds or a minute to lead the dance before the teacher calls another student to lead.
12. **Body Part Mix Up:** The leader calls out a body part the children must touch. For example the leader says elbow, and kids must touch elbow. Once you go through one round commands, mix things up and change the rules. Now, when you call out a body part you must touch a different body part. For instance, instruct kids that when you say "touch your knees" they need to touch their shoulders.

13. **Count to Ten:** The teacher stands at the front of the class and raises both hands above her head, spread open and facing the class. The students raise their hands over their heads, fingers spread, and facing the teacher. The teacher begins counting slowly from one to ten, and at ten lowers her hands to her sides. The class follows until everyone is back in the position they started in.
14. **Elephant Stampede:** The teacher puts a hand to their ear and say "What:s that I hear?" The class responds by saying "Elephant Stampede!" The teacher then says, "Where are the elephants? I can barely hear them." The class responds "Far away!" and begins quietly stomping their feet to mimic the sound of elephants stomping off in the distance. The teacher repeats their lines, adjusting for how close the elephants are until the herd arrives in the classroom. Once the 'herd' arrives, kids can stomp and make noise until the teacher quiets them down by saying; "Oh, good, they're going away." The kids stomp their feet more softly. They continue to listen and respond to the teacher until the herd leaves the classroom.
15. **Staring Contest:** Two kids face each other. They can stand or sit. They stare each other down without moving, talking or changing their facial expressions. The first person to do so loses.
16. **Duck Duck Goose**
17. **Simon Says:** When Simon says, "Simon says jump!" the children must jump. But if Simon only says, "Jump!" and somebody jumps, that person must sit out for the rest of the game. The last person standing becomes the new Simon. Another excellent game for developing self-regulation because children must listen carefully, pay attention, and follow directions.
18. **Shake-a-Long:** Kids are giving instruments they can shake (i.e. maracas, tambourines, rice in a bottle, etc.) They shake their instruments as the music plays. When the music stops they stop shaking.
19. **Ring Around The Rosie**
20. **Ready Set Go!** Have the kids line up. When the leader says Ready, Set, Go, everyone starts walking. Everyone stops when the leader says STOP. Next, the leader says Ready, Set, Goose. Nobody moves. Then the leader says Ready, Set, Gorrilla. Nobody moves. Leader says Ready, Set, Go! Everyone goes again. You can change this to whatever wording you want. The purpose is to have the children waiting to move until a certain word is said out loud.
21. **Follow the Leader:** the leader calls out actions that the children must follow the actions exactly.
22. **London Bridge**
23. **Mother May I?** One child is the 'mother' and stands facing away from a line of kids. She then chooses a child (at random or in order), and gives them a direction. These follow a pattern, such as, (Mary, you may take 'x' giant/regular/baby steps forward/backward.
24. **Sleeping, Sleeping, All The Children Are Sleeping** by Youth Therapy Source
25. **Hide and Seek**
26. **Peanut Butter Jelly Game** by Youth Therapy Source
27. **Mirror Game:** Kids partner up and take turns making different faces and their partners must imitate them. For an added challenge, students can imitate one another's' body movements.
28. **Color Ball** by Youth Therapy Source. This can be adapted for preschoolers by using different color construction paper instead of writing the name of the color on an index card.  
Kids partner up and take turns making different faces and their partners must imitate them. For an added challenge, students can imitate one another's' body movements.
29. **Freeze Tag**

## Activities That Teach Preschool Children Self-Control

1. **Yoga For Preschoolers**
2. **Walking Meditation For Preschoolers** by Blissful Kids
3. **Calm Down Jars** by Kiddie Matters
4. **Mindfulness Activity w/Plastic Easter Eggs** by Kiddie Matters
5. **Guided Meditation For Preschoolers**
6. **Self-Control Bubbles** by Learning Ward Instruction
7. **DIY Stress Balls** by Natural Beach Living
8. **Feelings Memory Game** by Kiddie Matters
9. **Feelings Identification Activities** by Kiddie Matters
10. **Preschool Feelings Activities** by Kiddie Matters

## Board Games That Teach Preschool Children Self-Control

1. **Melissa & Doug Junior Suspend Family Game (31 pcs)**
2. **Hide and Seek Alphabet Learning Game**
3. **Go Fish: Swimming Towards Self-Control**
4. **Operation Board Game**
5. **Let's Go Fishing**
6. **Perfection**
7. **Shark Bite**
8. **Hungry, Hungry, Hippo**
9. **Don't Spill The Beans**
10. **Don't Break The Ice: The Frozen Game Edition**

## Preschool Self Regulation Resources On Teachers Pay Teachers

1. **ABC Calm Down Cards**
2. **Feelings Dice**
3. **Emoji Feelings Identification Cards**

Recommended for you:

**100+ Social Skills Activities For Preschoolers**

**Executive Functions: What is it and Why Is It Important**

### *References*

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Tominey, S. & McClelland, M. (2009). Red light, purple light: Initial findings from an intervention to improve self-regulation over the pre-kindergarten year. Manuscript in preparation.

Williford, A. P., Vick Whittaker, J. E., Vitiello, V. E., & Downer, J. T. (2013). Children's Engagement within the Preschool Classroom and Their Development of Self-Regulation. *Early Education and Development*, 24(2), 162–187. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2011.628270>

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### Comments

*Kim says*

*march 4, 2019 at 7:09 pm*

Thank you so much – these are great ideas! I'm always trying to think of things like this to teach my preschoolers... it's great that they're all here in one place.

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