

# From Parent-Control to Self-Control

## *Building Self-Discipline in Our Children*

*By Carol Kuykendall*

### **I have a dream.**

Each of my three children (ages 11-16) will always say “no” to peer pressure, keep their rooms sparkling clean, spend the right amount of time on homework and the right amount of money on clothing, buckle up, slow down, floss regularly, eat nutritionally, make all the right decisions even when I’m not around.

In other words, I want my children to develop a healthy sense of self-discipline as they grow up, but I am learning the process can be tricky. We are tempted to overprotect, over control, and subtly discourage rather than encourage our growing children to take steps toward *self*-control.

“Self-discipline” is the growing awareness of right and wrong and the growing desire to aim toward what is “right” – even when the child doesn’t want to and someone isn’t around to *make* him. As Christians, we know that what is “right” is determined by God and explained in the Bible.

“Self-discipline” has two parts. “Discipline” is the training which teaches children to control their impulses and desires. It also teaches an attitude of respect for limits and authority. “Self” indicates the need to transfer that authority and responsibility from parent to child.

Here are some steps in the process of building self-discipline:

### *1. Establish the young child’s respect for authority by demanding obedience.*

Three-year old Billy wants to run out of his yard and across the street to his friend Tyler’s house, but since he cannot safely cross the street, his mom makes a rule: he must stay in the yard. If Billy breaks the rule, he faces the consequences.

When our children are young, we demand their obedience and punish their willful disobedience. Enforcing rules teaches them to respect authority and to expect consequences for their actions. Our job is to make the rules clear, establish fair consequences and state them clearly, consistently enforce the rules and carry out the consequences, and reinforce good behavior with praise.

### *2. Build confidence in the child’s decision making ability.*

“Wear your coat. Do your homework. Get off the telephone. Eat your vegetables. Hurry up. Buy this. Don’t buy that.”

Such commands tell children they are not capable of making decisions for themselves. Yet, a child’s confidence in his or her ability to make decisions is a critical step to developing an internal authority. To help the building process, we can begin with decisions which have minimal consequences, like the choice of which cereal to eat. Later, the choices become more significant.

As our children grow, we need to give them more information and fewer commands. Our role becomes advisory as we help them consider their options. We teach them *how* to think, not *what* to think. We encourage them to become problem solvers and make decisions on their own.

3. *Allow them to accept appropriate responsibilities.*

At our house, the early morning hours are a tornado time when everyone scurries about, trying to get out the door. I used to scurry the most, making breakfast and lunches and gathering up coats and books for each child. One morning I was sick and realized that I had robbed our children of the opportunity to become responsible for themselves. Now they put together their own lunches and clean up their breakfast dishes. Whether it's tying their shoes, making their beds, or doing their laundry, don't (on a regular basis) do for them what they are capable of doing for themselves, even though it make by easier and more efficient.

4. *Encourage them to own their own problems.*

Susan, 14, sleeps through her alarm and blames her mother for not getting her out of bed. Then she asks for a written excuse for being late to school. "Tell them I was sick," she says. Her mother complies. The next week, Susan oversleeps two mornings. Again she blames her mother, and again her mother writes excuses.

Susan's mother is owning Susan's problem and rescuing her from the consequences. If we thwart the natural flow of action (or lack of it!) and consequences, we place a stumbling block in the development of our children's self-discipline.

Before intervening, ask: Is this my problem or her problem? Is it life threatening or morally threatening? The answers tell us when to step in.

5. *Help them set goals, but let them determine the follow-through steps.*

Kendall, 11, wanted to start piano lessons again, but I didn't want to nag her about practicing. We agreed that she and her teacher would set a reasonable goal and choose a book she could complete within the next month. Kendall then determined the practicing necessary in order to reach that goal, and I stepped out of mine, until the end of the month when we would review her progress.

6. *Allow them to fail.*

The father of the prodigal son (Lk. 15) no doubt feared his youngest couldn't cope on his own with all that money, but he let the boy go. His son squandered the money and made poor decisions but he learned from his failures and eventually returned home. Whether it is an aimed-for goal, a risk in a relationship, or a financial investment, we must give our children the freedom to fail... without saying, "I told you so."

7. *Trust them and trust God.*

Watching our 16 year old drive out of the yard alone for the first time left me weak-kneed. What if he went through a red light or forgot to look both ways? But I was no longer in control, and now I had to trust him... and Him.

When children are born we are totally responsible for them. By the time they leave home, they should be totally responsible for themselves. As we transfer that responsibility from our shoulders to theirs, we have to trust God's love for them. He has a plan for their lives and will bring good out of even their most difficult experiences. As parents, we surely make mistakes as we raise our children, but we do the best we can with the time and the opportunities we have. Then we hope and pray... and trust.