

Teachable Moments: Self-Control

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You've passed out a worksheet to your 4th grade students and haven't finished explaining the task. Without understanding directions, Johnny starts working with no strategy or plan. The result - he gets a poor grade and then asks if he can redo the assignment.

In a tenth grade Social Studies class, the teacher, hoping to encourage critical thinking, leads his students in a discussion of a current event. Some of the students are quick to blurt out their thoughts, making immediate value judgments without adequate knowledge or understanding of the issue.

The above scenarios indicate the crucial need for students to develop self-control. Self-control is another way of saying the ability to manage impulsivity. It is the ability to control thought or emotion and our expression of them. It is a critical component for problem solving. Duckworth and Seligman, cited by Costa & Kallick (2008, p. 19-21), indicate that self-control, exhibited as self-discipline, is a greater predictor of academic performance than even IQ.

The good news is that it's a character trait which educators can help students develop. Even at a young age, self-control can be taught, and impulsivity managed.

Below are some of the ways which Dewar (2011) suggests can foster self-control in students:

- Create an environment where self-control is consistently rewarded – “one treat now, or two treats later”.
- Support young children with timely reminders. When reminded of the rules just before a task, kids were more likely to check their impulses.
- Any time we ask kids to play by the rules, we encourage them to develop self-control, a classic example being the game, “Red light, Green light.” Games in which rules are modified or even reversed train children to go against habit, inhibit their impulses, and practice self-regulation. Researchers Shauna Tominey and Megan McClelland investigated the effect of such games (Tominey and McClelland 2009) with interesting results.
- Give kids a break – the ability to exercise self-control tends to diminish over time.
- Beat “self-control fatigue” (Inzlicht et al 2014) by turning “must do” tasks into “want to” tasks, so that students can find at least some part of them enjoyable.
- Encourage students to practice planning. Giving reminders to plan, strategy games which reward players for planning ahead, and learning to talk through problems are all steps in the right direction.