



## **SELF-CONTROL**





## Self-Control



What comes to mind when you think of self-control? Maybe you think of discipline, like waking up early to meditate or work out. Or perhaps you think of all the things you cannot do when practicing self-control, like staying up to watch just one more episode of the show you're bingeing. When thought of this way, self-control isn't the most glamorous of the SEL competencies. Although self-control often requires us to practice discipline, it is a much more nuanced competency than simply exerting control over our thoughts or behaviors. Fly Five defines self-control as "the ability to recognize and regulate one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to be successful in the moment and remain on a successful trajectory." The standards for self-control are:

1. Adheres to social, behavioral, and moral standards
2. Manages overwhelming thoughts or emotions
3. Controls impulses and delays gratification
4. Shows hope and perseverance

Developing these four standards of self-control does involve managing our impulses and saying no to distractions or behaviors that will derail our success. But it also requires us to initiate habits that will be fruitful for the long term. As we build self-control in our students and ourselves, we can focus on fostering "long-term congruent behaviors" (Gillebaart, 2018, para. 6) by taking positive, proactive actions that will put us closer to our goals. For example, for a student to achieve a long-term academic goal—let's say graduating at the top of



their class—it is not enough to exert self-control to avoid distractions. They must initiate positive study habits and learn to seek help when they need it, as well. When we focus on these two aspects of self-control—inhibiting and initiating—we can set ourselves and our students up for both short and long-term success (Gillebaart, 2018).



Self-control can be especially useful during the coronavirus pandemic because it helps us cultivate a long-term perspective and manage the unprecedented emotions that can accompany unprecedented challenges. While admittedly it can be difficult to focus on long-term goals when the day-to-day feels like a paradoxical mix of chaotic and tedious, self-control offers strategies for taking small, daily steps that accumulate into success in the future. We can explicitly develop self-control in our students and ourselves by using the following techniques:



- **Create environments that are conducive to success.** Remove possible distractions that may derail you from reaching your goal (DeWall, 2014). If you are trying to write 1,000 words a day, keep your cell phone away from your writing space. Create a set of standards for your work space that guide you toward getting your best work done; write them out and keep them somewhere visible so you're better able to follow your own expectations.

For students, discuss what typically distracts them and have them consider what they can do to remedy that distraction. Do they need to keep all internet windows on their computer closed to focus on their Zoom class? When possible, have students create their own little space for online learning. This helps students settle into a learning environment. They can even have a special outfit, just for class time, so that even virtual learning feels separate from the rest of their day at home.

For educators, adapt your in-person expectations and rules for an online classroom to provide consistency for students. Use the chat box and the hand-raise function so students can practice self-control, even as they are learning online.

- **Incorporate rest/breaks into your routine.** Self-control is thought to be a finite resource, and rest can be a crucial component for building and maintaining self-control. Check in with students and model how to replenish their energy through deep breathing and mindfulness practices. Inform students that when they notice their self-control is waning, they can take a break to have a snack or just close their eyes for a few minutes to reset.



For online learning, incorporate activities that allow students to focus on something other than the screen. Ensure that students understand how focusing online and focusing in person may feel different, and that it's okay if they need additional scaffolding to exert self-control in one environment or another.

- **Prepare.** If there is a situation in which you or a student may have trouble with self-management, practice the steps necessary for success beforehand. This preparation helps the body know how to respond in the moment, making it less likely you'll give in to an impulse or get overwhelmed; the situation may still be difficult, but you won't be going in unprepared (Kennedy-Moore, 2016). For example, if you know you have a meeting coming up about a conflict, and you know it will be difficult to manage your emotions, take time beforehand to practice taking three deep breaths. Visualize someone saying something you disagree with, and just breathe. Show students how to do this, as well. If they are going to enter a situation where they may have difficulty with self-control, role-play with them beforehand. Work to automate their behaviors so they are set up for success in the moment.
- **Build "initiatory behaviors."** Introduce positive actions and habits, or initiatory behaviors, into your and your students' routines that will put you on a path toward reaching long-term goals (Gillebaart, 2018). Initiatory behaviors can include reverse engineering a goal, where you or your student identifies a goal and then works backwards to see which actions and behaviors they'll need to initiate to get there. Or it can look like embedding small, positive habits into the day that will help you reach your goals. If you're focusing on initiating positive healthful behaviors, incorporate brief, daily walks and setting a hydration goal each day, for example.

For students, encourage them to reach their goals through small, manageable behaviors as well: read (or practice math, meditate, exercise, etc.) for at least twenty minutes each night or create a personal schedule for when they will practice whatever behavior it is that will keep them moving toward success.

- **Practice mindfulness.** A crucial component of self-control is being able to recognize and manage emotions. Mindfulness helps us to do just that. For younger students, consider posting an emotions chart and have frequent check-ins to see how everyone is feeling. For older students, incorporate mindfulness into the classroom and allow students to explore their emotions through deep breathing and visualizations. Challenge them (and you) to focus on their thoughts even when they have the impulse to fidget or move on, allowing them to incrementally build their capacity for self-control.



Cultivating self-control fosters skills integral to early school success: flexible attention, working memory, and inhibitory control (McClelland & Cameron, 2011), and it has been shown to be a strong predictor of positive outcomes, including fewer absences from school and less procrastination (Duckworth & Seligman, 2017). Self-control helps students form relationships, which in turn allows them to help each other follow behavioral and social norms (Blake et al., 2015) and gives students the skills and agency to regulate their own mental health by outlining steps for facing overwhelming emotions (Lennarz et al., 2018). When students and adults are able to show self-control, lessons run more smoothly and deeper learning can occur. And, importantly, self-control can help to keep us focused and actively working toward a bright future, even when the present moment may present challenges. As we all work together as a community to continue providing quality education in joyful classrooms (virtual or in-person!), self-control is a crucial element to keep ourselves and our students sustained, focused, and thriving.



## References

---

- Blake, P. R., Piovesan, M., Montinari, N., Warneken, F., & Gino, F. (2015). Prosocial norms in the classroom: The role of self-regulation in following norms of giving. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 115, 18-29.
- DeWall, D. (2014, December). Self-control: Teaching students about their greatest inner strength. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2014/12/self-control>.
- Duckworth, A. L., & Seligman, M. E. (2017). The science and practice of self-control. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(5), 715-718. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617690880>.
- Gillebaart, M. (2018). The 'operational' definition of self-control. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1231. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01231>.
- Hagger, M., Wood, C., Stiff, C., & Chatzisarantis, N. (2010). Ego depletion and the strength model of self-control: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin: American Psychological Association*, 136(4): 495-525. DOI: 10.1037/a0019486.
- Kennedy-Moore, Eileen. (2016, May 17). Three strategies for teaching children self-control. PBS Kids for Parents. <http://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/three-strategies-for-teaching-children-self-control>.
- Lennarz, H. K., Hollenstein, T., Lichtwarck-Aschoff, A., Kuntsche, E., & Granic, I. (2019). Emotion regulation in action: Use, selection, and success of emotion regulation in adolescents' daily lives. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 43(1), 1-11.
- McClelland, M. M., & Cameron, C. E. (2011). Self regulation and academic achievement in elementary school children. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, 2011(133), 29-44.