

WHEN YOU'RE OVER THE LIMIT YOU NEED HELP.



Babies are not born with self control, or the ability to stop oneself from doing something you want to do. Rather, it develops and increases over the first few years of life. In actual fact, it is something many people struggle with for the whole of their lives.

Sometimes young children just can't stop themselves. What they are doing may be so much fun or so interesting that even though they have some idea that it isn't okay, and won't be approved of by adults, they just keep doing it. Pressing buttons and moving the volume control on the TV, DVD or VCR, pulling toilet paper off the roll, flipping light switches on and off, pulling the cat's tail, pouring liquid, throwing things and tearing pages out of a book are all acts that have huge appeal to under three year olds. Unfortunately, they are also things that mostly adults don't approve of!

Developing and using self control challenges young children, as it does many adults who struggle with it too. Knowing what you should do is not the same thing as having the will power to do it, whether you are two or thirty two. Many adults acknowledge having insufficient will power in areas such as eating, smoking, drinking, or spending money. We may understand perfectly all the reasons to stop smoking, cut down on alcohol intake or curb spending, but understanding doesn't always translate into the ability to do what needs to be done. We need to remember this, when living or working with young children, and remember how hard it is to do the right thing. Sometimes they know what they should do, but just cannot get themselves to do it.

The suggestion isn't that adults just say "Oh well, she can't help herself", or to respond in anger. Children need carers to help them when they can't help themselves. They need carers to step in and take charge, not just because they may put themselves in dangerous situations or cause damage to themselves, others or the physical world, but because they need to learn what is acceptable behaviour. What they need is for the carer to be fair and firm to stop them, but with an empathetic and helpful manner, not one that simply shows anger or annoyance, or dares them to keep doing the thing they can't stop themselves from doing. They need carers who understand how hard it is to do the right thing.

Sometimes carers respond in a way that almost provokes the child to keep doing what is not allowed. They offer no help and literally dare the child to keep doing it. This can sometimes demand of the child more control and understanding than he or she is capable of.

Imagine Evian, a young toddler having a great time ripping pages in a book. A carer who recognises this is probably a classic case of "this is so much fun that even though I have some idea I'm not supposed to do this, I just can't stop myself" will respond differently to one who thinks Evian is "just being naughty". Responding firmly and showing disapproval will give Evian the message that tearing books is not a good thing to do. Such a response may involve a stern look and telling Evian that he must not tear books because then they aren't there any more to be enjoyed. Always give at least a brief explanation when stopping a child from doing something, this is the only way children will eventually build up an understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Because the main issue is Evian's lack of self control, a carer sensitive to under three year olds will know that he probably has to do more than just tell him to stop, which might work with an older child. Rather, helping him stop by offering Evian a toy he knows he likes and taking away the book. This experience and ones like it may make carers question whether allowing toddlers to tear up old pieces of newspaper, a favourite activity, is a good idea. It might be confusing to a young child just trying to figure out what's okay to do and what isn't. Maybe it doesn't make sense to expect Evian to understand the difference between the paper in a book and the sheets of newspaper provided for tearing.

It helps to remember that so much of children's unacceptable behaviour is simply them acting their age and being the very young human beings they are. They need lots of help from understanding parents and carers.

Young children need parents and carers to set reasonable limits and help them do the 'right thing'.