

Use these twenty top tips, tried and tested strategies, alongside your own knowledge of the children, to help children develop their own self-discipline and self regulating coping skills for life.

1. Personal social and emotional development is central to the development of self –discipline. Build children’s self-esteem and well-being at every opportunity because these are paramount. Therefore never make fun of a child, use sarcasm or belittle them in any way because humiliation is a destructive and highly damaging feeling. Some children may become withdrawn, anti-social or aggressive when they feel insecure or rejected.
2. Never reject a child. Do show them the rewards and consequences of their behavior. For example “Well done, that was a kind thing to do, aren’t you a good friend!” or “Oh dear, Jacob feels sad that you punched him. Punching hurts and that’s why he’s crying. Were you feeling cross because he took your favorite red train? Next time you should ask him if you can play too or get the sand timer and take turns every 5 minutes.” This helps children to develop ‘theory of mind’ [developing an understanding of how other people think and feel]. Children who are able to do this are more likely to be thoughtful of others, maintain a strong sense of self and have good self-esteem.
3. Never shout at children because this encourages the ‘fight or flight’ survival mode to kick in and makes them experience life through a hostile environment when they need a positive, calm, reassuring, firm but fair one. Being on a heightened state of alert means that they are more likely to resist interacting positively with their peers and other adults.
4. Give clear and consistent boundaries such as ‘Golden Rules’ that are drawn up together as children will feel ownership of such boundaries if they have been involved in devising them with you as part of a team. They are more likely to be successful as a result. Once you have decided on appropriate boundaries, using clear language and minimal words to aid memorization [e.g. “Do be kind and gentle, don’t hurt anyone”], apply these consistently and share with parents so children can have them reinforced at home as well as in the setting.
5. Sitting on the floor or chair requires intense effort and brain/body co-ordination when you are a young child so resist the temptation to have children sitting still for more than 5 or 10 minutes. When this is necessary, to help children develop their listening skills and attention span, use props, brain gym, music and puppets etc. encouraging active participation so that you are not setting the children up to fail by asking them to ‘sit still and listen’ for longer than is developmentally appropriate.
6. Use visual timetables and sand timers to reassure children that they are in a predictable and routine organized environment. If children know what to expect next, have ample ‘transition time’ [“Finish off what you are doing please because in 5 minutes we are going to go outside”], they can feel calm and in control rather than stressed and shocked or frustrated that they can’t finish what they were hopefully engrossed in doing.
7. Ensure your learning environment is conducive to learning and is irresistible to interact with because bored children misbehave as a way of making their own interesting activities and experiences. If they are stimulated by a high quality learning environment with excellent resources and continuous provision that they can ‘free flow’ around both inside and outside, they are more likely to be engaged and engrossed in what they are doing.
8. The EYFS states that children should have access to an outdoor environment and daily opportunities to go outside because research demonstrates that children who benefit from lots of freedom of movement, who have the opportunity to exercise, work on a larger scale outdoors and be active, enjoy higher levels of concentration and are less likely to have challenging behavior.

9. When you feel comfortable in your own body, it's called 'embodiment'. Children develop a strong sense of self through this. It can be achieved through dancing, singing plenty of action songs and finger rhymes, outdoor play, running, crawling, rolling, skipping, jumping, climbing, and cycling and so on. This enables children to learn the effects of hitting, stamping, squeezing, stroking, clapping and how to move, balance and act appropriately in a variety of situations. When children feel in control of their own bodies they can quite literally put their own physical boundary around themselves.
10. Kneel or sit down at the child's level so that you are not towering over them. Children do not respond well when they feel intimidated. Let them feel and know that you are 'on their side' and not sitting in judgement from a position where you're assuming they want to misbehave. Don't we all behave better when we have someone we trust alongside us who believes in us and values us even when we are in the wrong? A helping hand in the right direction is priceless!
11. Giving children their personal space is important. Be honest now, can you be a little bit of a 'control freak' from time to time? I know I certainly can and that I have to remind myself that allowing children to follow their own ideas and lines of enquiry ['PLODs' – 'possible lines of development'] is very important. Children need open-ended experiences as well as some adult-directed activities and the right balance must be struck between the two. Free-play with resources such as sand, water, Play-Doh, paint, clay, and foam, bubbles both indoors and outdoors can benefit children enormously.
12. Following on from the point above is the necessity of providing children with plenty of opportunities to make their own choices. Being able to make your own decisions is extremely empowering in several ways. The trust adults put in children to do this helps build self-esteem and confidence and children who feel that they have some control over their lives tend to be more resilient and are more thoughtful and caring of others. By role-modelling care. Respect and by valuing the thoughts and feelings of the children in this way, don't be surprised when the children do so too!
13. Your voice should be at the volume and intonation that you would expect from the children. Never shout. Try whispering or lowering your voice to get the children's attention rather than raise your own voice above the volume of the class. This will only strain your voice and add to the volume. Alternatively use body/sign language, instruments or music to give children time to 'tune in' to you. The children in my last Reception class loved to guess the nursery rhyme tune that I was playing on the xylophone; they would start singing gradually once they identified it until all 33 children finished off or stopped what they were doing as they sung and finished my poorly played rhyme – far more in tune and time than me!
14. Couple 'bad news' with 'good news'. If a child hates swimming and fears getting in the water, they are likely to manifest unwanted behavior when they know it's a swimming day. They may be withdrawn, tearful, and aggressive or throw a tantrum. However if you know their favorite thing to play with in the water tray is a mermaid who's tail changes color when it's wet, you can couple the bad news with good news making it more palatable for the child. "When you go swimming today you can take the mermaid in the pool with you and see if her tail changes color there too! Do you think she will need armbands too? Shall we try to put some on when we get there?"
15. Don't 'herd' children like they are cattle when moving around from one place to another. They will act like a herd, become less thoughtful of others and crowd behavior will take over. Split children into groups, move to music, allow children to be themselves not losing their identity in a crowd, competing for a place or attention.
16. Track unwanted behaviors and record 'incidents' noting the time, place, children and resources involved etc., The more detail you have the more helpful it can be when 'diagnosing' the common thread, difficulty or cause of the issue. For example, if Jake always displays deteriorating behavior following snack time, check his juice or snack from home does not have

too much sugar or too many colorings or additives and suggest to the parents to try water and fruit or raw vegetables.

17. Unwanted behavior tends to manifest itself when a child is crying out for attention. Try not to judge or dislike the child (just the behavior) and monitor and focus on the reasons causing the behavior because children have many issues to deal with today that will diffuse your anger instantly towards such behavior and secure your compassion, patience and respect. For example abuse, absent or sick and disabled parents, bereavement, illness etc.
18. Powerful rewards can help support positive behavior management but be careful with these. They come with a health warning because what we are trying to develop in children is self-discipline and the ability to regulate their own behavior and to feel good about themselves because that in itself is reward enough. Praise, stickers, free choice time, special responsibilities, playing with a favorite toy or resource are just some ideas.
19. Celebrate even the smallest of successes with parents so that children feel the reward two fold. Encourage parents to share positive behaviors and achievements with you. This is especially important for those children with persistent behavior issues. Children and parents need to hear and celebrate the positives rather than get paranoid and ashamed and disheartened about the mishaps.
20. Use the 'Six Step Approach';
 - 1) Approach quickly and calmly, stopping any hurtful behavior
 - 2) Acknowledge feelings [when you articulate how young children are feeling especially when they are unable to find the words, it soothes, calms and reassures them so that they know that you know exactly how they feel]
 - 3) Gather information [you may not have seen the cause of the conflict and want to be fair and hear all sides of the story even if you did so everyone involved feels valued, listened to and as if they have had a fair hearing].
 - 4) Re-state the problem [gives children time to understand and process]
 - 5) Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together [children take ownership and develop life skills for problem solving and conflict resolution].
 - 6) Be prepared to give follow up support

In conclusion, although behavior management may well be one of the most challenging parts of our roles today as practitioners, if we can see the learning of conflict resolution and problem-solving as an adventurous journey and opportunity to grow and learn, we can have a more 'half a bucket full' attitude and approach not fearing such conflicts and dramas in our setting but expecting them as a natural part of life and growing up. Dare I say it, we can even look forward to the individual differences and creative path-finding that each child brings to such a process if it's well managed and many will learn to see that conflicts can be enjoyable learning opportunities that enrich our days and provide essential life skills for the future! Did I go too far? Is that just a little too much? Well none of us are perfect but it doesn't stop us striving towards the dream of what could be!