

IMPULSE CONTROL

What is this developmental skill?

Impulse control is the ability to pause before acting. It allows children to think about what they want to do, consider whether it is safe or appropriate, and choose how to respond rather than acting immediately. Impulse control is a key part of self-regulation and develops gradually throughout childhood.

How does this normally develop?

Young children naturally act on their impulses. During the preschool and elementary years, the brain's executive functioning systems become more efficient through repeated experiences of co-regulation with caring adults. As children mature, they become better able to wait, stop themselves, and make thoughtful decisions, especially when they feel safe and supported.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect often keeps a child's brain focused on immediate survival rather than thoughtful decision-making. When caregivers are inconsistent, unavailable, or unpredictable, children may never have enough opportunities to practice stopping, thinking, and trying again with adult support. Instead, they learn to act quickly because waiting or reflecting has not reliably met their needs.

What might this look like?

A child with delayed impulse control may:

- Interrupt conversations frequently.
- Grab toys or belongings without asking.
- Run ahead without considering safety.
- Blurt out answers or comments.
- Hit, push, or yell before thinking.
- Have difficulty stopping once they begin an activity.

These behaviors often reflect immature self-control rather than intentional defiance.

Parenting Implications

Rather than expecting immediate self-control, provide calm reminders, consistent routines, and opportunities to practice stopping and thinking. Games like Red Light, Green Light, Simon Says, and turn-taking activities help strengthen impulse control in playful ways. Praise moments when the child successfully pauses before acting.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of asking, "Why won't my child think before acting?" ask, "Has my child learned how to pause before acting?" Your calm guidance helps build the brain systems that make self-control possible.