

INHIBITORY CONTROL

What is this developmental skill?

Inhibitory control is the ability to stop, pause, or resist an immediate impulse in order to respond in a more thoughtful and appropriate way. It helps children wait their turn, think before acting, follow rules, manage strong emotions, and choose behaviors that fit the situation. Inhibitory control is not about suppressing feelings—it is about learning to regulate behavior despite those feelings.

How does this normally develop?

Inhibitory control begins in infancy through co-regulation with caregivers. When adults consistently soothe distress, set gentle limits, and help children recover from frustration, children gradually begin to internalize these regulatory skills. During the preschool years, children become better able to wait briefly, follow simple rules, and stop themselves before acting. These abilities continue to improve throughout childhood and adolescence as the brain regions responsible for self-regulation mature.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can delay inhibitory control because children often experience long periods without the consistent co-regulation needed to build self-control. Instead of learning to pause and think, they may learn that immediate action is necessary to meet their own needs or protect themselves. Chronic stress also affects the development of the prefrontal cortex, making it more difficult to inhibit impulses, particularly when the child is emotionally aroused. As a result, children may react quickly before they have an opportunity to consider the consequences of their behavior.

What might this look like?

A child with difficulties in inhibitory control may:

- Interrupt conversations or blurt out answers.
- Act before thinking about the consequences.
- Have difficulty waiting their turn.
- Grab objects from others without thinking.
- Become physically or verbally reactive when frustrated.
- Struggle to stop an activity when asked.
- Know the rules but have difficulty following them in the moment, especially when upset or excited.

Parenting Implications

Children strengthen inhibitory control when adults provide calm, consistent guidance rather than relying on punishment alone. Keep expectations developmentally appropriate, establish predictable routines, and practice waiting, taking turns, and stopping during everyday activities and play. When a child acts impulsively, focus on helping them recover and think through what happened instead of simply emphasizing the mistake. Repeated opportunities to practice self-control in a supportive environment gradually strengthen this skill.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, *"They know better—they're just choosing not to behave,"* consider, *"They may not yet have the ability to stop themselves in this moment."* This perspective recognizes that inhibitory control is a developmental skill, not simply a matter of willpower. By remaining calm, providing structure, and co-regulating during difficult moments, caregivers help children build the ability to pause, think, and respond with greater self-control over time.