

Life's Building Blocks, Inc.
Making Character Development Fun



Virtue of the Month – Self-Control

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . .
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man my son!*
— Rudyard Kipling

As we explained in the first month's letter, our character is made up of all our virtues. Thousands of years of discussion on character development have shown that we must continuously work on all our virtues—adopting and practicing virtuous habits—to become better people. And virtue is found in moderation. For example, to truly embody the virtue of patience, we must display just the right amount of it. If we have too little patience, we become intolerant, anxious, or hurried. (That's a vice!) If we have too much patience, we might allow others to always have their way without insisting on fair treatment or defending our rights. (That, too, is a vice.) The virtue of patience falls midway between the vices of "being impatient" and "being a pushover." To develop good character, we must practice each virtue in the right amount until it becomes our nature.

The highlighted virtue for this month is self-control.

What is self-control?

A complex virtue, self-control can be understood on several levels. Patience is one part of self-control. Other important and related aspects of self-control include self-discipline, acceptance, contentment, resilience, confidence, thoughtfulness, peacefulness, gentleness, and serenity. For the purposes of this adult guide, let's consider the following virtues as levels of self-control.

I. Patience (something even the youngest child can practice)

Description: The basis of patience is a quiet faith that things will turn out fine if we wait and stay calm. When we are patient, we do not allow ourselves to

be hurried, and we respond to other people's mistakes (and our own) with gentleness. For a younger child, the development of this virtue may start with anger management—a basic understanding that we cannot control everything around us, and that getting angry almost always makes things worse.

Examples: In the chapter book *The Worst Day Ever*, Carlos gets more and more frustrated as his impatient actions cause more and more problems. As his frustration increases, he makes even more poor decisions. Fortunately, Carlos finally listens to Zaki, the “character chameleon,” as well as the town sage, Mr. Lacey, and learns to be patient with his situation and make better decisions.

II. **Self-discipline** (especially important for older children)

Description: Self-discipline is having the self-control to do what we should and not to necessarily follow our immediate desires. It also may prevent us from doing things we will regret. Self-discipline is related to delayed gratification—realizing that we may be better off in the long run if we don't take immediate action.

Examples:

1. In the chapter book, Carlos has two grandmothers—humorously, one who is very excitable and one who is very calm. The book points out that most of us also have two sides to us: one that gets excited about events and people, and one that is able to remain calm in difficult times. Clearly, these two sides—and our struggle with them—shape our response to life's situations. Again, to become a more virtuous person, we must seek moderation between these two extremes.

2. In the activity book dialogue, Carlos tells Mr. Lacey of his recent experience at a friend's party, when he chose to keep everyone quiet and calm rather than contribute to the chaos. Carlos used his best skills of peer leadership and self-discipline to manage the situation. He even took on Biff, the town bully, by remaining calm and using the collective influence of others to get Biff to improve his behavior through patience and self-discipline.

III. **Acceptance** (important for older children and adolescents)

Description: As we get older and develop more patience and self-discipline, we can approach a life of acceptance and realism. This does not mean we become mediocre or lazy, but that we learn to accept the things that

we cannot control and deal with events and people with contentment and confidence. This contentment may mean that we do not envy others and wish for things we do not have. Contentment is a very difficult notion for children to grasp, particularly in our materialistic society.

IV. **Contentment** (may require an adult level self-understanding)

Description: Adults who have developed patience, self-control, and acceptance will find much more contentment with themselves and with others. This kind of inner peace and contentment — which, for many people, comes through spiritual growth — can lead to a serenity that makes deep reflection and thoughtfulness possible. People who are at peace with themselves and others are much more in control of their responses to life and can make thoughtful decisions, tempering the emotions that might cause them to make poor choices. This is the most difficult and important stage of self-control.

Why is self-control so important?

Let's look at patience and self-discipline:

Developing patience often provides us with the beginning of self-discipline, the ability to get along with others in the world, and, most importantly, the clear-headedness to make good decisions.

Developing and practicing self-discipline can make us happier, reduce stress, and help us take responsibility for our actions. Self-discipline is also the beginning of “self-understanding,” which leads to self-improvement. Most importantly, we cannot possess any of the other virtues if we lack self-discipline.

Why do people lack self-control?

Simply stated, we lose self-control when one or more of the related virtues are not properly developed. For example, if we lack self-discipline, we will eat unhealthy food. If we lack resilience, we will let everything get us down and we won't be able to “bounce back” from challenges. It is also easy to lose self-control when the people around us are agitated or undisciplined. As British poet Rudyard Kipling noted, it's quite an achievement to keep your head “when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you!”

How do we develop our self-control?

We have to actively practice, even habituate, those related virtues. We all know

that the more dietary self-control we have, the easier it is the next time to turn down the chocolate cake. Similarly, when we go through a difficult situation and emerge successful, we strengthen our character and develop resilience. Striving to become a more virtuous person involves repeatedly testing your character under stress in difficult situations. When you do the right thing, you strengthen your character. Even when you fail to do the right thing, though, you can learn from your mistakes and correct your character to become a better person. Have you ever told your child after he or she accomplished something difficult that the effort was “character building”? Well, it was actually character building for the virtues of persistence and resilience.

Questions to ask your child this month:

- What does it mean to be patient?
- Why is it important to be patient?
- What happens to us when we are not patient?
- What would happen if everyone were impatient, all the time?
- What kind of decisions do we tend to make when we're patient?
- What kind of decisions do we tend to make when we're impatient?
- What are some things that make us impatient?
- How can we overcome those pressures?
- What are the benefits of waiting for longer-term enjoyment, rather than seeking immediate pleasure?
- What does it mean to have self-discipline?
- How is this different from being disciplined by an adult?
- Which kind of discipline is better? Why?
- Why is it important to have self-discipline?
- Why do we sometimes say or do things we regret?
- What is confidence?
- Why is it important to have confidence?
- How do we gain confidence?