Stop, Think, Go: Helping Kids Ages 4 to 8 Build Impulse Control

The Behavior Bestie

Why this is so hard for little kids

If your child run towards the street, grabs a toy, hits when they're mad, or blurts out the second a thought pops up, here's what I want you to know first: these behaviors are completely normal for their age, and I promise you're not doing anything wrong as a parent.

Here's what's going on. The part of the brain that says "wait, stop, think first" is still under construction until the early twenties. Yes, you read that right. At ages four to eight, kids feel impulses much faster than they can control them.

That's why impulse control is a skill, not a personality trait, and skills can be taught. Kids learn it the same way they learn to tie their shoes or ride a bike: with guidance and modeling, lots of practice, and positive feedback.

And if you have a three-year-old, this guide can work for them too. Use short, simple version of these strategies, just be ready to give lots of extra reminders.

The strategies in this guide will help you teach your child to STOP, freeze their current behavior. THINK, consider the situation and think about different options. And finally, GO, move forward with the best choice.

Three guidelines to keep in mind for the following strategies in this guide:

1. Practice during calm times. It's hard for kids to learn new skills in the middle of dysregulated moments.
2. Keep your tone steady, be mindful of your body language and facial expressions.
3. Teach what you want to see. Tell kids what TO do, not just what to stop doing.

In the moment:

Start with you

Before any scripts, here's the most important tip in this guide: kids borrow our regulation when they can't find their own. If you feel yourself getting frustrated, take a slow breath and lower your voice before you say a word. It's not about being perfect, it's about doing your best, and giving yourself grace on the days it doesn't go as planned.



When they run away

What's happening:

Big feelings come out through their body before words can

Try saying:

- "I can see you're mad. You can say 'I'm mad', but your body needs to stay safe."
- Then show them what a safe body looks like.
  - "Hands stay on your belly or behind your back."
  - "Your feet stay on the floor."

What to do:

- If someone else was hurt by the hitting, pushing, etc., check to make sure they're ok
- If safety is an issue, physically stop first, then talk second
- Help your child name their feelings



When they hit, push, or kick

What's happening:

Their body takes off before their brain catches up.

Try saying:

- "Stop. Freeze like a statue."
- Then, "Hold my hand, please."
- Once they're safe, give the reason in one short answer. "I asked you to stop because running away isn't safe. You could get hurt and we have to watch for cars and people."

What to do:

- Get down on their level
- Keep your voice firm, but not angry
- If you have to chase after your child, keep your reaction neutral. Being chased is exciting, and big reactions or a fast chase can turn into a game that makes running more likely next time. Move quickly when you must, but keep your voice and face steady, and save the conversation for after they're safe.

Follow up later:

Once everyone is settled, help your child make things right (giving an apology, drawing a picture, etc). An apology in the heat of the moment isn't sincere because a dysregulated child doesn't understand what they're saying. Wait until they're ready and guide them through it.

In the moment, continued:

When they grab or take things

What's happening:
They see something they want, and their hand gets there before their brain says "wait."

Try saying:

- "I see you really want that. Give it back, and then you can ask: 'May I have a turn, please?'"
- Then point them toward what they can do while they wait: "While you wait, you can pick something else to play with."

When the answer is no
Sometimes they can't have a turn. Maybe it's a toy at the park that belongs to a kid they don't know, or the candy lined up at the checkout.

- Say it plainly and kindly- "I can see you really want that. That one belongs to someone else, so you can't have it."
- If you're at the store you can say "That's not on our list today. I know it's hard to see it and not get it."
- Give them something to do like load the groceries, play a game, take deep breaths

Expect big feelings to happen and be sure to stay calm. Giving in teaches them that grabbing and melting down work. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Say it once, kindly and clearly and don't reopen the conversation. Kids will negotiate and every round can wear you down until "fine, just take it" slips out.

When they blurt or interrupt

What's happening:
The thought pops up and out of their mouth before they can hold it.

Try saying:

- "Hey, I can see you want to talk to me right now. Hold that thought, and I'll talk to you as soon as I get a chance."
- Skip a specific time like "in a minute," because literal kids will count it out and hold you to it.
- A quiet signal, like a hand on your arm, lets them show they're waiting without words, and giving them something to do while they wait helps too.

What to do:

- When you can, turn to them quickly and say, "Thank you for waiting. Now tell me what you wanted to say."
- Start with very short waits so they win at it, and build up over time.

Practice games

Games are a fun way to teach kids the skills behind impulse control: stopping on cue, waiting, taking turns, and calming their body when feelings get big. Practice these in calm moments, when everyone is relaxed, that's when kids are able to learn new skills. Five to 10 minutes is plenty of time. Keep it playful, and let your child win a lot at first.

Freeze Dance

Put on a song and dance together. When the music stops, everyone freezes like a statue. Take turns being the one who controls the music. This builds the stop-on-command skill you'll use if they ever run off. You can even pair the music stopping with a word like "Freeze!" or "Stop!"

Red light, Green light

This is a classic game. Green means go, red means stop, and yellow means slow motion. Let your child call out the traffic light colors too, so they get to practice telling everyone else to stop.

Treasure under the cup

Hide a small treat or gift under a cup and keep your hand on top. Say "I know there's something under here you really want, but you have to wait for it." Then count together, slowly. Start with a tiny prize and short wait, around 30 seconds. As the waiting grows make the prize bigger, so the reward matches the wait. Tell your child the plan before you start, so they know this is a game and not a trick.

Pause and pass

Roll a ball or pass a toy back and forth between each other. The person who holds the ball or toy gets to talk and everyone else listens. This works for blurting or interrupting by teaching your child to wait their turn.

Balloon belly breathing

This one helps your child learn what to do with a big feeling. In a calm moment practice saying feelings like "I'm mad!" Naming the feeling gives your child words to use. Next place your hands on your belly, showing them a safe place to put their hands. Breathe in to feel your belly rise like a balloon. Breathe out to feel your belly flatten like a deflated balloon. Practice this often so when big feelings show up your child already knows where their hands go and how to take a deep breath.

Want more help?



Thanks so much for checking out this guide! I'm Nicheyta, a BCBA, with nearly a decade of experience supporting kids, families, and educators. If you'd like more help, I'd love to support you!

The best way to stay in touch is my email list, where I share behavior tips and let you know when new resources are ready. You can also follow me on Instagram at @thebehaviorbestie and visit my website at thebehaviorbestie.com.