Transcript: Beyond "Use Your Words!": How Babies Begin to Develop Self-Control in the First Three Years Featuring Brenda Jones-Harden, Ph.D.

Q: So, I am delighted to welcome Dr. Brenda Jones Harden, who's joining us today to talk about how young children develop self control. Uh, Brenda is associate professor at the University of Maryland College Park. She is a clinician and researcher whose work focuses on the development and mental health of children at environmental risk, and the implementation and evaluation of early intervention programs for this population. Brenda, thank you so much for joining us.

A: I'm glad to be here.

Q: You know, we're talking about young children and self-control. I'm not sure my quite grown children have developed self control. Umm, but I would—I certainly remember when they were little that this was something that was—that was challenging; not just for them, but of course for me and my husband, umm, when they just would lose it or do something that was very, umm, impulsive that clearly indicated they just didn't have those brakes yet. Umm, so—when we talk about self control, umm, what—what do we mean by that? What does it look like, umm, when a child really doesn't have much impulse control?

A: Well, I would define self control as the child capacity really to modulate their emotions and behaviors. I think that word control is a little misleading, because it's sounds like children should be able to stop a behavior right in the moment at a certain time. And—and, as you were talking about your, umm, adult children, well even we as adults don't have that capacity sometimes.

Q: Right. Right.

A: We lose it a lot. So, I think it's more the ability to use strategies to exhibit appropriate behaviors. And that—what is defined as an appropriate behavior does change depending upon the context, umm, in which a child finds himself. For example, it might be okay to yell at a ball game, but not in the house. It might be okay to throw a ball at other people when you're throwing catch, or playing catch, but not when, umm, somebody else is not a part of a game. So, it really does depend, which suggests that this really is a developmental process. And, umm, really I would argue that children are not really able to exhibit that kind of self control in the way we think about it until at least, umm, four or five years old.

Q: Well, you know, that's actually so important. And, umm, one of the things that, umm, inspired us to do these podcasts was the research that Hart Research did for Zero to Three. And in that research we found that, umm, you know,—43% of parents thought that a child could control their emotions, such as, you know, not having a tantrum, by age three. So, part of what you're pointing out is something that I think is very important, which is that parents' expectations can be a little bit inconsistent with what we know, and—and that can of course lead to, umm, unrealistic expectations about kids. So—

A: And certainly can impact a child's capacity to control self, because a parent's inappropriate expectations could lead to inappropriate discipline and other kinds of inappropriate behaviors with a child that could really make the child worse at this particular capacity.

A: I think it's important to think about self control as having cognitive, language, emotional, and behavioral components. In other words, children have to be able to think before they act, understand the consequences of their actions, use words like all the good nursery school teachers tell their children to use words instead of negative behaviors.

Q: Right.

A: Understand what they're feeling, how to manage those feelings, and then exhibit the appropriate behavior. So, that's very, very complex and challenging for young children. But there's certain specific things that I would argue are important to think about in—in sort of influencing a child's capacity to control self. One certainly is temperament, umm, which, you know, most of the temperament folk describe that as a biologic predisposition to certain behaviors.

Q: Right.

A: For example, were they the type of baby who could calm down when they got their bottle, or did they wake up screaming, or were they the kind of children who could be picked up and consoled easily or could they adapt to new situations, and that kind of thing? Those children, umm, who are able to do those things, are typically considered easy temperamentally. And children who have trouble with adapting, and consoling, and all that kind of stuff are more like difficult infants. So, umm, those, uh, babies typically have more difficulty controlling self. But also there's this hot topic called executive functioning, those cognitive processes like attention, and

your ability to remember things in your brain in order to solve a problem, planning, reasoning, problem solving in a strategic way, inhibition.

Q: Right.

A: Uh, but we know that most of these executive functions—functions are not fully developed until adolescence. So, even adolescents sometimes have trouble. The behavioral control that we see in teenagers, umm, sometimes has to do with the fact that they haven't developed these kind of executive functioning skills.

Q: Right. Right.

A: And then, you know, there's things like, umm, the children's context if they're tired, if they're hungry, if they're vulnerable in some other way like they're frightened, also their mood of the day, or—or even the demand of the context. For example, if you're in a childcare facility where there are just too many children and not enough caregivers, certainly that context can—can influence your ability to be controlled. And then, if children experience significant events, and I think it's important to note that a significant event for a child may not seem particularly overwhelming for us, so, for example, if they have a change in their schedule, or—or their caregiver and childcare is absent that day, or even, you know, a preferred playmate is absent, those kinds of things can affect kid's ability to self-control. also the big ticket, you know, big events, like if a family moves, or the child loses a parent, or one of the things that I do a lot of work in is if children experience some kind of trauma, like maltreatment, or, uh, exposure to violence—family violence or community violence, those things obviously have huge implications for a child's capacity to control self. But for me the most important thing, is that relationship with a trusted adult, and, I mean, mostly a parent.

Q: Right.

A: So, what you learn from your parent, what your parent shows you in terms of their own self control, how that parent helps you to be consoled as a very young infant, and to, uh, help you to address your own frustrations as a toddler, umm, who teaches you strategies, it's that relationship to me that has the biggest impact on whether a child is able to exhibit controlled behavior.

A: You really showing the child how hard you're working to regulate yourself, and even when you don't, apologizing to the child and saying, "Mommy, really got out of sorts that time, and I'm really sorry. I'm trying to work on holding it together." I had, uh, a colleague of mine talk about that the repair sometimes in those situations is as important as you doing the behavior in the first place. So, showing the child that you can get dysregulated too, you can apologize for it, and you can pull it back together.

Q: They learn from parents, umm, you know, through the relationship how parents manage their own, umm, anger and other feelings, and manage to kind of put the brakes on it.

A: Oh, absolutely. You've got the parent who is trying to manage who the child is, and trying to manage their own feelings, and trying to respond to the child in a way that's appropriate for that child. So, it's a very kind of complex, umm, dynamic family situation that occurs. And (8:46) parents —it's very challenging to parents to be able to pull all that together.

Q: Yeah. Yeah.

A: And one of the things that helps me is thinking about if it's so challenging to me, how must it feel for the young child.

Q: Yes. Exactly. Well, that's a really important thing to be able to—even when they're, you know, stomping their feet, you know, to stand in those shoes. You know, one of the questions that a lot of parents have is—in addition to providing the love and emotional support, is it also very important to create very clear boundaries? Is it true that kids need those kinds of secure boundaries particularly when they do feel out of control?

A: Oh, absolutely. Particularly young children need, as you're intimating, the structure in a social environment that says, "I will keep you safe, and I will make sure that you're okay." They know on some level that they don't have the ability to do that for themselves. And I'm, you know, talking basically about children, you know, five and under. So, they rely on the adults in their world to provide the scaffolding, the structure, and the safety, and the security that will enable them to, umm, you know, move along

Q: Right.

A: So, it is critical for, umm, parents and other adults, like adults in the childcare center, to provide that kind of structure that says to the child, we keep a safe environment here. things that are not acceptable are when you hurt yourself or you hurt others. And one of the things that's really been found to be really important for children's pro-social skills and their ability to control self in ways that don't hurt others is their capacity to be empathic. when we say to children, "How do you think that makes Johnny feel when you hit him," or, "How do you think that makes mommy feel when you scream at me like that." So, those kinds of things where you're trying to get children to really think about the other really help them to, uh, develop control skills particularly when we're talking about behaviors that relate to the other.

Q: You know we've talked about that age is a factor, temperament is a factor, umm, you know, obviously some of the environmental things, if a child's exhausted or hungry that they're gonna be less able to manage their emotions, but are there ways that parents can help them develop those muscles?

A: I think there's a lot we can do as parents to help children learn self control. And one of the things I like to say to parents is that, you know, we think about discipline as saying no or punishing, but the root word of discipline is to teach. So, there are lots of things I think parents can actively teach their young children to do that really help them to gain self control. One, I think the importance of providing a few rules for behavior, you know, keeping safe, being kind to others, taking care of their things and other bodies is important. I also think, just like the good nursery school teacher says, "Use your words, use your words," that it's important to have children understand and label their emotions. "I'm angry right now," for example, and be able to say that.

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A: So, I actually talk to children about think, think, think, like Winnie the Pooh, as a way to think before they do something. And there's even some research on executive functioning that if you ask children to just stop—not only does their behavior improve, but even their cognitive capacity. . I also think, you know, getting children to use self talk is important. So, having them to even say think, think, think out loud to help themselves, or, "Oh, I'm getting mad now, I'm getting mad now"—that kind of thing—that kind of self talk can help. I also think, and I've seen some really good nursery school teachers use this, taking a quiet moment really well. So, they create even in their classrooms a little space where children can go—

Q: Right.

A: It makes children take responsibility, and they can go and get away from other children. I think you can do that in a home, a little, you know, quiet place for the child that they know that this is where I go, and they sort of do it. It's not like a time out.

Q: Yeah. I have a friend who has something she calls the peace corner, and it's just that. I mean, it's like a little tent, and it's sort of decorated in a sweet way, and it's a very comforting little environment. And—umm, and she says sometimes I go in it too.

A: I love that. I love that peace corner idea. And I like the idea of—of a parent using it, because then you're, again, modeling for a child how sometimes you get upset, and here's a strategy that you've taken. And children might laugh at it, but I think it's a good, umm, example for them to follow. Umm, I also think that, you know, little children have—can come up with strategies themselves. Like you can say to them, "What helps you to calm down? What helps you to feel better?" And so you can come up with these kind of individualized strategies that the child uses. For some children it might be going to read a book. Another kid it might be playing with their favorite toy. But their own sort of strategies that they can come up with that helps them to calm down.

A: Also, you know, I really, really believe in making a big, big deal when children show any kind of pro-social or controlled behavior. And—and I'm always on the lookout for it. Umm, and sometimes with some children who have a lot of trouble, you have to—you know, I often say it's like finding a needle in a haystack, but when you see it you've to make a big deal.

Q: Yeah. This is so great.

Q: What a lot of parents are—are told, Brenda, is, you know, create an environment where kids aren't constantly hearing, no, don't touch that, no, don't go near that, you know, umm, that they're free to explore, especially if you have a child with a temperament that is a big personality, and they—they—they are active—and—physically and they, umm, you know, don't have a lot of impulse control? It—it seems to me very, very important to create an environment where they're free to express themselves without constantly hearing "no'.

A: Absolutely. . When you're constantly told no, it's starts to have less of an impact. So—

Q: Right.

A: As a behavioral strategy it's not as effective as really positively reinforcing a child when t they are able to control their impulses or they do something nice to one another. So, we know that that positive works much more than that kind of adverse response. But the other thing I think that you are alluding to is the importance of prevention, and that is you don't want to set up an environment where you constantly have to tell children "no".

Q: Right.

A: So, you don't want to have them playing in a room where you have all your, you know, priceless, you know,

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A: So, you have to put those away. You have to, umm, also, you know, make sure that there are no kind of safety concerns, So, when we have situations where children, umm, are exposed to things that could hurt them, we're quick to say no. But clearly we should get rid of all that kind of stuff. But I do think, having said that, that, again, it's important for children to understand very early on that there are limits to what they can do. No child should be given the message that you can do whatever you want to do. I would argue as early as the second half of the first year of life we begin to, umm, help children understand that the world is one of limits.

Q: Right.

A: And that you cannot do everything you want to do even when you are nine months old, that you can't, umm, pull mommy's earring, umm, through her ear, that, you know—but, again, it's how you set the limits that's important

Q: Let's say a parent really feels that even though they're child tends to have a lot of trouble controlling his emotions, that the intensity of their tantrums, or the number of tantrums is just out of control, that—you know, when—when do you advise parents to seek help?

A: Well, I—first I would like to say that tantrums really are normative.

Q: Right.

A: That's the first thing that I like to tell parents. So, umm, they shouldn't think that because their child tantrums this is, umm, inappropriate behavior. And—and what tantrums really are is the child saying I have a self, and I have goals. The problem is that sometimes a toddler's goals are inconsistent with the goals of their environment, like, you know, sticking their fingers in plugs, and standing on furniture, and hitting another child who has a favorite toy. So, you know, their goals are often inconsistent with the rest of ours, and so they get frustrated and they fall apart emotionally. That is a process that is important for them to go through, because it is through that process that they begin to learn, one, that they do have these intense feelings that occur when things happen in the world that they don't want to have happen, and then they develop strategies. So, that's the first kind of myth I want to dispel, that tantrums suggest that parents are doing something wrong or something's wrong with the kid. Umm, I think you really have to do prevention again and try to anticipate situations that might cause a tantrum to emerge. I also feel it's important to think about ignoring tantrums. Again, we know that they are normative. We know that it's usually because a child wants to do something that we have said no to. So—I mean, my experience as a parent and as a clinician is that the best thing to do with tantrums is to ignore it. Now, that clearly has to change if safety is an issue, like when a kid is hitting head against the wall, or floor, or something like that.

Q: Right.

A: But I also think that it is so important for parents not to give in. What I've seen happen so much is that parents get completely overwhelmed by the tantrum and just say, "Here, take it. Take it. I just don't care."

Q: Right. Right.

A: Because they are so upset themselves, or they're embarrassed in a public place. But then the kid learns really, really quickly this is what I can do to make mom give in, or make dad give in. So, then you're really increasing the child's, umm, use of tantrums as a way to get what they want.

Q: Right. Right. No. I have a vivid memory of my daughter—I mean, not even two—She was fussing and wining about something, and—and I did just what you said. I said, "Okay. Fine. Here you can have it." And she stopped crying, and she said, "I cry; momma do it."

A: She had learned a lesson.

Q: Oh, my, gosh, this is really, really not good.

A: Yeah. They learn that lesson very young.

Q: Umm, yeah. They really do. When you were talking before—earlier about, their ability to put on the brakes, I—a lot of parents tell me, you know, I have a kid who's hyper, or they're—they are, you know, actually concerned about attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. Are you hearing this more? Are you finding that this is more of a problem? And are there things parents can do to determine whether their child is just very active, or really has a serious issue?

A: I think we clearly know that children who have an ADHD diagnosis typically have more difficulty with self control. But I think it's important to note that really that kind of diagnosis should not be given to a child until they're around seven or eight. You want to make sure children have gone through all the developmental transitions that they have that make them look like they have ADHD behavior, like, umm, the lack of mature language, the lack of cognitive skills that allow them, as you said, to put the brakes on, to think about the future, to think about, umm, the consequences of their behavior. You want to make sure they've attained all those skills that would shape their behavior.

Q: Right. (Need a second pause here as it is a change of topic.)Something we were talking about earlier, and something that Zero to Three has focused on for years, is, umm, the relationship between the parent and the child, or the caregiver and the child, umm, and—and how much of a contribution, umm, an adult makes in terms of, modeling self control,

A: You know, learning self control begins in infancy, begins with that very important relationship with your parents. So, parents really, really have to think about, umm, not only their contribution in terms of teaching children self control, but their own, umm, self control. I think it plays a critical role. One of the things that I often tell parents is that the first thing you have to do is forgive yourself, because, umm, all of us have momentary or sometimes more than momentary lapses in our ability to self-control, and you have to be willing to say I'm doing the best I can and forgive yourself, because otherwise you will me be so anxious.

A: You have to really know what is going to make you most stressed. Just like you're trying to teach your children how to be more in tune with who

they are and their own emotions, you have to do that too. So, if you know that when you go home from work, umm, you are really stressed out, you have to sort of set up some kind of time where you go take your five minutes, even if that's going into the bathroom and locking the door.

Q: Right. Right.

A: But I also think, you know, it's important that you, just like you're trying to teach your child how to label emotions, put feelings into words. You can say to a child that you're upset and that you're angry, and you can use words instead of screaming, and hollering, and getting all out of control yourself. And sometimes really time out—you know, I don't like to think about time out as a way to punish children. I like to think about time out for parents.

Q: Right.

A: That you really have to, uh, take a step away from the child so you can take a breather, and count backwards from ten, and get yourself together so you can, uh, respond to them in a more appropriate way. And the other thing I really think is important is parents having some place they can go to dump this stuff, you know, , a spouse, or a good friend, or somebody—or a therapist.

Q: Right.

A: And—and I think parents often don't give themselves time for self care. d.

Q: Yeah. You can't be an effective parent if you haven't nurtured yourself, particularly if you have a child who's more challenging. Umm, and certainly during the toddler years it's very critical to build in that time do to the things that we often put last, because we kind of see parenthood as an—you know, an either/or proposition—either you're nurturing your children, or you're not. And, in fact, by taking care of yourself, you're really doing them a great favor, which is to be able, as you say, to come to more challenging times with—you know, with the reserves that you need,

Q: Well, listen I have to say this has been fabulous. Umm, so much great advice, and wonderful insight into kids and how they learn to control their emotions. Brenda, thank you so, so much for your time.

A: Sure. Thank you.

Q: Okay. Take care.