

Self-Discipline

Self-control, self-restraint, self-reliance, independence

"Without discipline, there's no life at all."

Katharine Hepburn

Have you ever been in a classroom when the teacher steps out for a few moments? The teacher is barely out the door when one student starts entertaining the others by telling jokes, drawing cartoons on the blackboard, or standing on a desk. In an instant, other students jump up, chase each other around the room, and wrestle on the floor. Missiles of wadded paper and erasers shoot across the desks. Then suddenly a spy shouts "The teacher is coming!" Instantly, the students rush for their seats. A desk is accidentally overturned. The teacher enters the room, hands on hips, and demands to know what's going on. Everyone sits quietly, pencils ready, with innocent smiles of conspiracy on their faces.

Sound familiar? Here's a contrasting story:

Unionville School in Indiana was a small school that housed students from first grade through high school. When I was teaching there, my students decided to have a real experience in democracy and wrote their own class constitution. One day there was a huge, unexpected snowstorm that dumped a two-foot layer of icing over Southern Indiana. Living 30 miles out of town, I was unable to make my way to school until two hours after it started. The principal greeted me with "Hey, you didn't even need to come in today. I sent someone down to your room to take care of your class, and the kids were already doing it for themselves. They were halfway through their English assignment."

What's the difference? In the first example, the students expected the teacher to control their behavior. Their discipline came from *without*. For the Unionville kids, their discipline came from *within*.



Discipline from *without*.



Discipline from *within*.

Taking Charge of Your Life

When you were very young, your parents had to tell you what to do, and they had to do nearly everything for you. As you grew older, your parents (and other people) expected you to start making some of your own decisions and taking

care of yourself in certain ways. You learned to do what you should (“will power”) and stop yourself from doing what you shouldn’t (“won’t power”). You started using **self-discipline** and **self-control**. The more this happened, the more you freed your parents, your teachers, and even yourself, because you didn’t have to keep making case-by-case decisions about your behavior. You *internalized* some of these decisions, and they became automatic and habitual.

When you depend on other people to determine your behavior and always be in charge of your “will power” and “won’t power,” you’re like a pawn on a chessboard, waiting for someone to move you. You feel powerless—because you are. Self-discipline and self-control give you power over your life. It’s only when you’ve developed these important traits that you can grow into the wonderful person you’re meant to be.

“I’m not afraid of storms, for I’m learning
how to sail my ship.”
Louisa May Alcott

Self-restraint is what helps you in unpredictable or tempting situations. You hold your fists back when someone shoves you; you hold your tongue back when someone insults you. You can even put the brakes on your thoughts when a harmful idea or thought pops into your head. Using restraint doesn’t mean that you let other people pick on you. You can still be assertive and stick up for yourself.¹ But you don’t act impulsively in ways that hurt you or anyone else. You behave respectfully no matter what.

Self-reliance means that you always have someone you can count on—YOU. When you’re home alone and feeling hungry, you don’t wait for your parents to return and fix you something to eat. You make yourself a snack. If you want to learn how to play the guitar and your parents can’t afford to pay for lessons, you get a part-time job and earn the money you need. If you know that you want to go to college someday, you do your best to earn good grades.

Chicago Bulls superstar Michael Jordan took cooking classes when he was an adolescent—“because girls weren’t interested in me or whatever it was, and I thought, I may be alone for the rest of my life.” He wanted to make sure he could take care of himself. (Of course, this assumes that women should do all of the cooking—a more common belief when Jordan was a teen than it is today.)

When you *demand* independence, the adults in your life usually pull tighter on your chain. When you *demonstrate* self-reliance—along with self-discipline, self-control, and self-restraint—adults often trust you more and *give* you more independence.

What can you do to develop and strengthen these character traits in yourself? Following are some strategies you can try.

Eight Ways to Strengthen Your Self-Discipline

1. **Decide that you really want to be someone who’s self-disciplined**, self-controlled, self-restrained, and self-reliant. Your desire will motivate you to make good choices. When there’s something you want, you work to get it.

2. **Make a personal commitment** to develop and strengthen these traits. Write down specific things you’ll do to fulfill your commitment. *Examples:* “I’m going to start washing my own clothes instead of expecting my parents to do it.” “Starting tonight, I’m going to save half of the money I earn from babysitting.” Tell someone you trust about your commitment. That person can encourage you to keep your promises to yourself. From time to time, tell him or her about the progress you’re making.

3. **Learn the rules** that determine what you can and can’t do. Family rules, school rules, society’s rules, laws, the rules of your culture, heritage, traditions, and/or faith—find out what they are and follow them. Do this on your own, with your family, with your class, with your faith community.

¹ See “Respect,” pages 217–218.