

A Case for the Distractible Toddler

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Toddlers are distractible. They might be fascinated by a colorful new toy, but only until the next best toy comes along. This can be maddening for parents or teachers, who often try to rein in a toddler's impulsivity. But should we really be trying to teach self-control? Psychologists are beginning to raise this question, and some are even suggesting that it may be detrimental to the developing brain to push it toward maturity too soon. University of Pennsylvania neuropsychologist Sharon Thompson-Schill and her colleagues study the prefrontal cortex, or PFC, the part of the brain that filters out irrelevant information and allows us to focus. It is also the last part of the brain to mature and become fully functional. It lags behind the rest of the brain until about age four. In the most recent issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Thompson-Schill and colleagues speculate that an immature PFC may not be a deficit at all, but rather an advantage in the first years of life because it could aid in learning language and social conventions.

Thompson-Schill, S.L., Ramscar, M., & Chrysikou, E.G. (2009). Cognition without control: When a little frontal lobe goes a long way. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(5), 259-263.