

Self-Regulation

What is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is a child's ability to control his or her behavior. It develops over time, and involves many aspects of social, emotional, and cognitive development. Self-regulation can also be thought of as the successful integration of emotion (what a child feels) and cognition (what a child knows or can do) resulting in appropriate behavior.



Some other things to know about self-regulation:

Self-regulation is not related to intelligence. Factors that help shape how well a child can self-regulate include:

- ★ **AGE:** Self-regulation develops as children grow.
- ★ **BIOLOGY:** Your child's temperament and how he responds to stressful situations affect how and when he develops self-regulation.
- ★ **RELATIONSHIPS:** Your interaction with your child, including how you accommodate his temperament and respond to his needs, affect how he learns to self-regulate.
- ★ **COGNITION:** Using language (especially naming emotions) helps develop self-regulation and sets the stage for the child's future learning.

Why Self-Regulation Matters

Self-regulation appears to help children solve problems and develop coping strategies.

- ★ Self-regulation includes the ability to focus and to control impulses. The sooner a child can self-regulate, the sooner she will be prepared for school, where academic and social success require her to think for herself and meet the expectations of others.

Children who don't learn to self-regulate usually have a harder time transitioning to school.

- ★ Being "ready for kindergarten" means knowing letters, colors, and numbers, but also means being able to sit still during circle time and get along with others.

What to Expect, and When:

INFANCY: Self-Soothing

- ★ It is critical to understand that until your baby is at least six months old, he relies entirely on caregivers to manage his stress – he has no ability to self-regulate. This is why we say that “you can’t spoil a baby” and that you need to respond to your baby’s cues quickly and consistently.
- ★ Infants rely on caregivers to respond to their signals and meet their needs for food, sleep, comfort, and interaction.
- ★ During the first year, babies learn how it feels to have their needs met, and gradually learn to create that feeling (known as “self-soothing”) with less help from you.
- ★ Through this maturation process, the baby learns ways to calm himself when upset.

TODDLERHOOD: Managing Emotions

- ★ During the toddler stage, children learn more about feelings, and begin to connect situations to emotions.
- ★ This is a difficult, yet important time of growth for children, often filled with displays of emotional extremes (ranging from excitement to frustration).
- ★ As children’s self-regulation and language skills develop, their temper tantrums and emotional outbursts often become more manageable and happen less often.



PRESCHOOL YEARS: Emotions in a Social Context

- ★ Between the ages of 3 and 5, children begin to understand the relationship between their feelings and their behavior.
- ★ This means that during these years, it is critical for parents and caregivers to help children identify and implement self-regulation strategies, such as practicing waiting and naming emotions.
- ★ For parents of preschool children, this involves setting limits and expectations for behavior. Preschool-age children have greater control over their impulses, and they are starting to think before they act.

What Parents Can Do

FOR ALL CHILDREN:

- ★ Provide structure and predictability.
- ★ Model self-control and self-regulation in your words and actions when you are frustrated, upset, or excited.
- ★ Seek help. If your child is struggling with managing her emotions or behavior, early identification and intervention can support both you and your child in developing these important skills.

FOR INFANTS:

- ★ Be responsive to your baby’s needs, such as hunger or tiredness. When your baby cries, pick him up.
- ★ Look for overstimulation cues such as turning away or arching the back; when they occur, give your baby a break and reduce the amount of stimulation.

FOR TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS:

- ★ Find ways to say yes rather than no. For example, “You can bang this pot with a spoon” instead of “Don’t bang on the glass table.”
- ★ Tell them what is possible rather than what is not. For example, say “Please walk” rather than “Don’t run.”
- ★ Name emotions, using words like happy, sad, embarrassed, and proud to describe how you feel.
- ★ Anticipate transitions and announce changes to normal daily routines well in advance.
- ★ Offer opportunities for creativity and play.
- ★ Be involved. Anticipate inappropriate behavior and re-direct it.