



Fostering Your Child's Self-Regulation

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What is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Self-regulation skills develop as children interact with their caregivers and the environment in a safe and meaningful way. They allow children to control what thoughts, emotions and behaviors they have; when they have them and how they experience them. For example, children who are able to keep themselves calm during a frustrating situation, instead of having a tantrum, are using self-regulation skills. Self-regulation skills start to develop during childhood, but continue throughout adolescence and adulthood. Self-regulation includes many skills that allow children to focus their behavior towards a goal and be in the right state of mind to learn.

These skills include the ability to:

- Control feelings and calm down when upset,
- Adjust to change and stick it out during challenges,
- Work well with others,
- Plan and organize and
- Communicate needs.

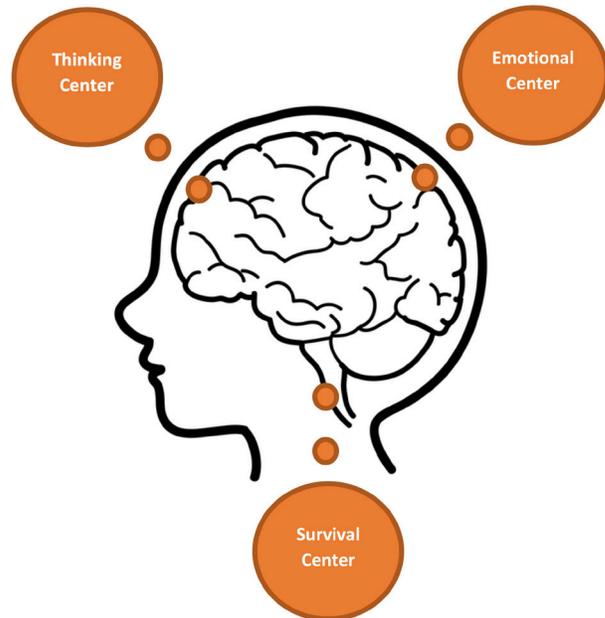
Self-Regulation Skills Across Development

Self-regulation is an important skill for all ages. Early self-regulation skills prepare for later skills that continue to mature through adolescence and into adulthood. Brain development plays an important role in self-regulation.

Infants rely on the “survival center” of their brain to engage in behaviors that sustain life, such as breathing and digestion.

Toddlers and preschoolers begin to be able to use their “emotional center” to communicate and express themselves through feelings.

Children and adolescents begin to be able to use their “thinking center” to problem-solve, stop and think before acting and organize their behavior.



When children are very young, or have not developed strong self-regulation skills, it can often look like the survival center and the emotional center of the brain are running the show, while the thinking center is not able to do its job. This makes it hard for children to control their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and gets in the way of learning.

Toxic Stress

When children are in stressful situations, their brain triggers a stress response that is designed to keep them safe. This type of response is called “flight or fight,” and is controlled by the survival center of the brain, which takes over in that moment to keep them safe. After the threat has passed and children feel safe again, the survival center goes back to its usual, calmer functions and the “thinking center” is able to come back online again and help with learning. This process is normal and happens to everyone.

However, too much exposure to stress can become toxic. This is often the case in situations involving abuse, neglect or violence.



Toxic stress overworks the survival and emotional centers of the brain, and overwhelms the thinking center. This makes it harder for kids to develop and use self-regulation skills and interferes with learning.

What does a growing brain need?

To develop self-regulation skills and strengthen the thinking center, the brain needs safe and meaningful interactions with family, peers and the world. This helps the brain grow and make new connections, which is the process of learning.

Without these safe and meaningful interactions, development of the thinking center is interrupted. Children then rely more on the survival center and the emotional center of the brain to deal with day-to-day life. This gets in the way of children's ability to regulate their thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

At this point, you may be asking yourself, "How can I, as a caregiver, promote my child's brain development and encourage development of the thinking center and self-regulation skills?"

Start with strengthening the connection you have with your child.

1. Build a positive relationship that supports your child's brain growth.
2. Respond warmly and consistently to emotional and physical needs.
3. Support exploration and learning.

This helps children feel safe and allows them to interact more meaningfully with the world, which strengthens the thinking center of the brain and promotes learning, including learning how to regulate thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

Tips for Fostering Self-Regulation

Positive connections

- **Meet your child's needs with empathy and guidance.** Listen to your child with warmth, while still providing clear boundaries and direction. This will help create a supportive relationship between you and your child.
- **Family routines and rituals.** Routines can be meals together, family playtime and bedtime routines. Routines help your child to feel safe.

- **Reflect what your child says.** Reflect or repeat back what your child says so that they know you are listening.
- **Provide lots of praise.** For every one direction or negative feedback you give, try giving five specific praises (example: thank you for sharing your toys).

Give clear commands

When giving instructions, make sure to be specific and break things down into small steps.

- **Consider developmental stage.** Kids vary in how well they understand the world around them. It is important to keep the child's age in mind.
- **Set clear rules and limits.** Setting clear, consistent rules for children based on their age and development can help avoid frustrations for both children and caregivers.
- **Set family rules.** Setting rules together as a family will help everyone feel like an important part. This way, children will be clear on the expectations and are more likely to follow the rules.
- **Positive rules.** It is best to have rules about what to do (positive rules) instead what not to do (negative rules). For example, "keep your food on the dinner table" is a positive rule. It tells the child exactly what is expected. "No food in the living room" is a negative rule because it only tells the child what not to do. Negative rules do not give clear expectations of what should be done instead.

Use positive discipline

Make strengthening self-regulation a part of your discipline. Try to turn punishments into a learning experience instead. Children who are upset or misbehaving may be crying out for an adult's help.

- **"Time In" or "Mindful Moments."** First, put the child in your lap or next to you. This will help them calm down and reconnect with you as someone they can trust to help. Talk about what happened and the emotions that may have led them to misbehave (example: anger). Then help them resolve the problem (example: helpful things to do when angry).

Practice, practice, practice

Remember that we all need practice to master a new skill.

- **Make practice runs.** For example, if your child struggles with touching everything while at the store, try making



a pretend visit to the store when you do not need to do any serious shopping. This will be a chance for you and your child to practice keeping hands to themselves without the pressure you feel to run your errands. Make it fun.

- **Play.** Practice through play. Playing gives a chance for your child to practice many important skills such as turn-taking and working with others. Playful interactions also help children develop their physical strength and muscles as well as language skills.
- **Breathing and Mindfulness exercises.** Yoga, meditation and breathing exercises can help children learn ways to calm down when they have strong feelings. This will help them return control to the thinking center and make good choices. For older children, other strategies like journaling and talking about difficult feelings can help children learn to cope with difficult situations.



Get extra help when you need it

Self-regulation can be developed through help and support. Therapy, counseling, parent support groups or mindfulness training may be helpful resources for you to seek out as you support your child's healthy development.

Resources for Parents and Caregivers

Mindfulness exercises can help children learn helpful ways to express and manage strong feelings.

- Mindfulness exercises for children: annakaharris.com/mindfulness-for-children/
www.calm.com/meditate
- Breathing exercises for children: <https://consciousdiscipline.com/videos/s-t-a-r-breathing-tool/>
- Mindfulness exercises for teens: <http://mindfulnessforteens.com/resources/resources-for-mindfulness/>

Resources for Educator

Teaching mindfulness to school students

<http://www.mindfulschools.org/resources/explore-mindful-resources/>

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The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
 - It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
 - Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
 - It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
 - More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
 - It dispenses no funds to the public.
 - It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
 - Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
 - The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
 - Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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