

What is Self-Regulation and How to Help a Child Learn Self-Regulation

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What is the Definition of Self-Regulation?

The term “self-regulation” is used to refer to a range of characteristics and abilities. A child with self-regulatory skills is able to focus his attention, control his emotions and manage his thinking, behavior and feelings. Adults are very good at multitasking, but children are not. An adult can be cooking dinner, talking on the phone and thinking about what to make for dessert all at the same time, whereas a child may go upstairs intending to brush his teeth and get distracted as soon as he sees a favorite toy at the top of the stairs. An adult can receive a present they dislike but still smile and thank the gift bearer graciously. A child will receive a gift they don't like and state “I don't want this!” and start to cry. Young children tend to live “in the moment” and are ruled by their impulses and their immediate desires or feelings, while adults can filter out distractions, exercise control and decide what is an “appropriate” response before we speak or act.

How can we help support a toddler or preschooler's self-regulatory skills?

- Provide a structured and predictable daily routine and schedule.
- Change the environment by eliminating distractions: turn off the tv, dim lights, or provide a soothing object (like a teddy bear or photo of Mom) when you sense a child is becoming upset.
- Role play with the child how to act or what to say in certain situations.
- Teach and talk about feelings and review home/classroom rules regularly.
- Allow children to let off steam by creating a quiet corner with a small tent or pile of pillows.
- Encourage pretend play scenarios among preschoolers.
- Stay calm and firm in your voice and actions even when a child is “out of control.”
- Anticipate transitions and provide ample warning to the child or use picture schedules or a timer to warn of transitions.
- Re-direct inappropriate words or actions when needed.
- Take a break yourself when needed, as children with limited self-regulatory skills can try an adult's patience.

How is your child learning some self-regulation skills?