

Early childhood development

Self-regulation puts children, caregivers in the driver's seat

Self-regulation plays a key role in children's capacity to learn, and their health and well-being. A growing body of research indicates that it may be more important than intelligence in determining how well children do in school. Not surprisingly, it's become a hot topic in early learning and parenting circles.



Dr. Clancy Blair

Dr. Clancy Blair, a leading U.S. researcher in developmental psychology, describes self-regulation as "a useful framework for incorporating our scientific knowledge about the brain

and our goals for early development. We want our children to be able to manage their emotions, impulses and attention, so that they are able to learn, form healthy relationships and behave appropriately."

His research with three to five year olds showed that self-regulation was a better predictor of early math and reading skills than IQ. He also found that high levels of stress had a negative impact on self-regulation and learning, and that children from low-income homes experienced more stress.

Self-regulation is closely linked to the development of executive function, explains Dr. Blair, who delivered a series of lectures at the University of Alberta earlier this year.

Executive function involves complex thinking skills that allow us to process the constant flood of information into our brain. It enables us to plan, organize, evaluate, remember things and shift our attention from one thing to another. If we learn how to regulate our emotions and energy levels in our early years, our executive function develops properly and we are less likely to experience problems later in life.

Self-regulation is often compared to the multiple tasks involved in driving a car. You have to brake, accelerate and shift gears smoothly, adjust your speed to road and traffic conditions and speed limits, and respond quickly to what's happening around you. Learning to drive takes time and practice.

High levels of stress shut down executive function. The overloaded brain switches into instinctual flight-or-fight mode. Children who are overstressed, anxious or aggressive are not able to manage their emotions and behavior, focus and learn.

The costs are high. It's been estimated that as many as half of all children enter kindergarten with self-regulation issues that will affect their success at school.

The good news is that self-regulation can be developed and parents, caregivers and early learning educators can support this process. "Supporting self-regulation may be one of the most important things we can do to safeguard and promote children's development," says Dr. Blair.



Quick tips on self-regulation

1. Children's ability to handle stress and stimulation varies a great deal. Figure out what a child's tolerance levels are and sets him/her off.
2. Self-regulation develops gradually. Parents and caregivers help infants regulate their emotions by responding promptly and appropriately to their needs, by calming and soothing. Toddlers are encouraged to express their feelings through language and gestures.
3. Children learn to regulate themselves through self-awareness. 'How is my engine running? Is it fast? Too slow? Just right?' Help them develop strategies to get their motor running right. E.g. rest, eat, take a couple of deep breaths, run, play.
4. Limit stressors. E.g. Turn off the TV. Reduce noise.
5. Practice self-awareness and effective self-regulation strategies yourself.

For resources, check out the Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative at <http://www.self-regulation.ca/about-us/canadian-self-regulation-initiative-csri/>.