

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is one of the most important skills for daily life. As adults working with children, it is vital that we support children with the development of their self-regulation. Children need guidance and tools to build self-regulation skills.

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to recognise and understand a range of emotions. Knowing what they are feeling and why. Working with children, we need to support and equip them with the tools and strategies to manage their self-regulation.

Key parts of self-regulation include:

- Managing emotions: Responding to feelings in healthy and constructive ways.
- Control of impulses: Thinking before acting.
- Focus and attention: Staying on task and resisting distractions.
- Problem-solving: Finding solutions to challenges.
- Adaptability: Being flexible and adjusting their behaviour as needed, depending on the activity.





Self-regulation: Support Techniques

Model Self-regulation:

Why? One of the most helpful and important ways of teaching children is for adults to model their own thoughts and feelings. Children learn by watching you. Show them how you manage your own emotions, cope with pressure, and solve problems.

How to do it:

- Talk about your own feelings in a calm way ("I'm feeling frustrated right now, so I'm going to take a few deep breaths").
- Demonstrate healthy coping strategies (e.g., taking a break, talking to a friend, exercising).
- Show how you problem-solve and handle setbacks.



Teach Emotional Literacy:

Why? Children need to be able to identify and name their emotions before they can manage them.

How to do it:

- Discuss the child's emotions ("You seem sad that your friend left").
- Use picture books and stories to discuss different emotions.
- Help them understand the connection between feelings and behaviors.
- Use simple visuals so children can identify how they are feeling.
- Have regular check-ins with children to find out how they are feeling.





Self-regulation: Support Techniques

Provide Structure and Predictability:

Why? Clear routines and expectations help children feel safe and secure, reducing anxiety and making it easier for them to regulate their behaviour.

How to do it:

- Establish consistent daily routines for meals, sleep, and activities.
- Communicate expectations clearly and simply.
- Use visual schedules for younger children.
- Provide warnings before transitions (e.g., "In five minutes, it will be time to clean up").
- Use a visual sand timer so children know how long they have left before moving on to the next activity.



Teach Problem-Solving Skills:

Why? When children have strategies for dealing with challenges, they are less likely to become overwhelmed and dysregulated.

How to do it:

- Help them identify the problem.
- Brainstorm possible solutions together.
- Discuss the pros and cons of each solution.
- Support them in trying out a solution.
- Reflect on what worked and what didn't.



Self-regulation: Support Techniques

Encourage perspective-taking:

Why? Understanding how others might be feeling helps children develop empathy and manage social interactions more effectively.

How to do it:

- Ask questions like, "How do you think your friend felt when you didn't let them take their turn?"
- Talk about the characters' feelings in books and movies.
- Encourage them to consider different viewpoints.



Encourage using strategies (tools):

Why? Being able to choose a strategy can promote independence and confidence in managing emotions.

How to do it:

- Create a calm corner with handheld sensory tools, bean bags, teddies to squeeze and cuddle, cushions, and calm lighting.
- Practice mindfulness activities together (e.g., focusing on their senses)
- Practice belly breathing by placing one hand on the chest and one above the belly button. When breathing, the hand above the belly button needs to move out.
- Listen to calming music.
- Practice different activities and see how they make the child feel. Examples; drawing, colouring, going for a walk, jumping on the trampoline. Talk about how the activities make them feel.





Additional Support:

Self-regulation takes time:

Why? Developing self-regulation is a gradual process. There will be ups and downs and your consistent support and understanding are crucial.

How to do it:

- Remember that setbacks are normal.
- Celebrate small successes.
- Be patient and persistent in your efforts.

The use of visuals and specially designed curriculums and programmes to support self-regulation can be really helpful. Some schools embed one programme for the whole school to use. Ask at the school and find out which one they may use.

When it might be time to seek additional support:

While all children benefit from support in developing self-regulation, some children with additional needs may face greater challenges. Consider seeking professional guidance from the child's school SENDCO if you are concerned. Liaise with an Occupational Therapist for further support on self-regulation challenges.

The child is displaying:

- Frequent and intense emotional outbursts.
- Significant difficulty following directions or controlling impulses.
- Challenges in social interactions due to emotional or behavioural difficulties.
- Suspected underlying developmental or mental health concerns.

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