

A parent's guide to...

self-regulation

Key facts about self-regulation and how to help your child develop it. By *Penny Tassoni*

Imagine the scene. A couple of friends take their four-year-olds to the cinema. Just as they are about to buy the tickets, the cashier says they are sold out. One four-year-old has a meltdown. She hits her parent and takes 20 minutes to calm down. The other child reacts very differently. After a couple of minutes of disappointed silence, she asks whether it would be possible to go to the playground instead.

So what made one child cope more easily than the other? The answer is that this child was able to self-regulate, while the other was at the mercy of her strong impulses and emotions.

FIVE FACTS ABOUT SELF-REGULATION

Here are five things that all parents need to know about self-regulation:

1. Importance

Developing self-regulation helps children in a variety of ways. If children are not a hostage to their impulses and emotions, it makes it easier for them to develop friendships, persevere and concentrate, and cope with the stresses of everyday life. Researchers believe it also helps them do better at school.

2. Development

While most toddlers find it difficult

to regulate their emotions, over time and with support children can learn to moderate their immediate feelings and impulses. There are many developmental processes at work in relation to self-regulation, but language in particular seems to play a significant part. The link between language, thinking and self-expression probably explains why most two-year-olds find self-regulation difficult as their language is far from being complete.

3. Routines

It would appear that children who have regular routines in place at home seem to have a head start when it comes to self-regulation. Routines seem to give children a sense of stability and this is one reason why early years settings usually have strong routines in place. Routines seem to protect children from feeling stressed and

so in their earliest years help them to self-regulate more easily.

4. Adult role models

Children also learn self-regulation by watching adults. While no-one is perfect, parents who are able to show self-control and stay calm when faced with the frustrations of life are in a better position to help their children. As children develop, parents can also help them learn strategies to develop self-regulation.

5. Tiredness

Being tired makes self-regulation difficult for both children and adults. This is one reason why naps are important for many children, particularly those under three years. Children who have a good sleep routine, for example, are more likely to find it easier to show good self-regulation skills.





Baking helps to teach perseverance, and can be looked back on as a 'success story'

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING SELF-REGULATION

While temperament is an element in self-regulation, children do need help to develop self-regulation skills.

Testing times

As well as benefiting from routines, children also benefit from having adults who are consistent in their expectations of their children's behaviour. Of particular note seems to be the importance of children learning that boundaries that have been set are not liable to move even if they whine or have a tantrum.

As most children will at some time have a go at testing the boundaries, it is important that first, the boundaries are reasonable and that, having set them, you are prepared to follow through. If, for example, you have said that once your child is dressed, they can watch the television, you should wait until they are completely dressed until it is turned on.

Life's big lesson

There are times when children cannot always be first, be chosen to do something or have whatever they see. Not being able to have what you want is one of life's big lessons.

Learning to manage one's feelings in such situations is important and it is best done in a context where you are loved and there is nothing really at stake. Family games are, therefore, great opportunities for children to develop some self-regulation skills. Games such as snap, KerPlunk or picture lotto help children to wait and take turns. During a series of games, let your child win so you can model losing. Talk about this and then at some point see how your child copes if they lose.

Distraction techniques

A useful strategy that we can use if something is proving frustrating or stressful is distraction. As adults,

we may make ourselves think about something else or focus our attention elsewhere. Most parents use distraction techniques with their young children as a matter of course, but as your child becomes older, you can start to explain how to use distraction with them so that they can learn this as a conscious technique.

Thinking ahead

One of the strategies involved in overriding the impulse to give up or to lose patience is to think ahead. If a child is delaying getting dressed for bed, the adult can remind them of the book that they can share once the task is done. Not only is this likely to make the child hurry up, but it will also help them to self-regulate by looking to the future.

Step by step

Another way that children can learn about self-regulation is to be involved in tasks that require a step-by-step approach. Planting seeds, making a kit together or baking are not 'fast' activities and so help children to learn to persevere. They are also useful activities to refer back to on other occasions, as being reminded of previous successes can help children to remain motivated when the going gets tough.

The Marshmallow Test

Finally, if you want to see self-regulation in action with young children, have a look for clips of 'The Marshmallow Test'. In this famous experiment, individual children were put in front of a marshmallow. They were told that if they could wait until the adult came back into the room, they would be given a further marshmallow. See a version of it at www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ ■