

Helping Children Self-Regulate

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Self-regulation is defined as the ability to manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. These skills develop in young children as they interact with their family, caregivers, and environments.

Children who are able to keep themselves calm during a frustrating situation, instead of having a tantrum, are using their self-regulation skills. These skills can be learned throughout the lifespan but can be extra beneficial for young children. By controlling their emotions, children can focus more on achieving their goals while keeping an open mind that stimulates learning.



Brain development plays a big role in self-regulation. Infants rely on the “survival center” near the bottom of the brainstem to maintain things like breathing and digestion. Toddlers and preschoolers start to use their “emotional center” known as the amygdala to communicate and express themselves through feelings. Young children and adolescents begin to use their “thinking center” or the cerebrum to problem solve, think before acting, and organize their behavior. Without the development of self-regulation skills, children will be stuck relying on the survival and emotional centers in their brains. This makes it hard for children to control their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

To develop these skills, the brain needs safe and meaningful interactions with family members, peers, and the world around them. This helps the brain make new connections that help with thought process and learning. To help your child(ren) develop these skills, start by focusing on building a strong connection with them. Respond warmly and consistently to their emotional and physical needs and encourage exploration and learning. Family routines and rituals are also beneficial to foster learning. This can look like family meals together, playtime, or bedtime routines. Focusing on positive rules can also encourage critical thinking. Focus on what things they should do instead of what they shouldn't.

Practice makes perfect for children and adults alike. If your child has a hard time controlling themselves in certain environments, continue to practice what that should look like and focus on what they are feeling. If you encourage them to share openly some of the things that frustrate them, you will be able to talk through those things and help them overcome them. Practicing through play can be a positive way for your child to practice new skills. Encouraging breathing and mindfulness exercises can also help children calm down and be aware of what they are feeling. These activities help them return control to their “thinking center” of the brain, which will help them make good choices.

Self-regulation is a skill that can be developed with time, help, and support. Therapy, counseling, and parent support groups may be helpful resources for you to seek out as you support your child(ren)'s healthy development. For more information, contact Cassidy Lutz at celutz@ksu.edu or by calling 620-625-8620.