Developing Self-Regulation in Young Children:
Lessons from Research
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Self-Regulation in Young Children

Children under age 5 do not have a reputation for self-regulation.

What are the signs you observe in preschool children that self-regulation is a challenge for them?

Connection to School Readiness

Kindergarten teachers most often identify young children as not ready for school because children show poor ________.
Why do young children struggle with self-regulation?

Session Objectives

At the end of this presentation, you should be able to:

• Understand what self-regulation is and how it is based on executive functions.
• Identify the three components of executive functions— inhibition, working memory, and mental flexibility— and how they support self-regulation.
• Describe how the growth of self-regulation is based on the maturation of the brain.
• Understand the influences of temperament and stress on individual differences in self-regulation.
• Describe what parents and education staff can do to support the growth of self-regulation.

Session Agenda

Here's what we're doing today:

1. Defining self-regulation
2. Self-regulation and executive functions
3. Self-regulation and the developing brain
5. Stress and its influence on self-regulation
6. How can parents and education and care providers support the growth of self-regulation in young children?
What is Self-Regulation?

The ability to internally manage one's attention, thinking, emotions, and behavior without external control

- self-control
- doing what doesn't come naturally

Self-Regulation Develops Over Time

Self-regulation takes time to develop

It is based on the growth of...

- areas of the brain that enable self-control
- temperament
- cognitive abilities related to memory, judgment, and mental flexibility
- experience with culture and adult practices for helping children achieve self-regulation
- capacities for managing stress

Executive Functions

Self-regulation is based on the development of cognitive processes that enable self-controlled, goal-directed thought and behavior called **executive functions**.

Executive functions are like the air traffic controllers of the mind
What are Executive Functions?

Executive functions include...

- **Inhibition**: the ability to resist a strong inclination to do one thing and instead do what is most appropriate or needed

  How do you use inhibition in self-regulation?
  How can young children learn to do so?

- **Working memory**: holding information in mind while mentally working with it

  How do you use working memory in self-regulation?
  How can young children learn to do so?

- **Mental flexibility**: being able to switch perspective, attention, or mental focus

  How do you use mental flexibility in self-regulation?
  How can young children learn to do so?
What are Executive Functions?

Executive functions include...

- Inhibition
- Working memory
- Mental flexibility

How are they important to how preschool children learn, pay attention, solve problems, and get along with other children and the teacher?

Development of Self-Regulation

At preschool, what must you do to go outside when it’s raining?

- Finish your activity
- Put things away
- Go to your cubby and put on your rain gear
  - Take off your shoes
    - Sit down on the floor
    - Pull off shoes and put on boots
  - Stand up
  - Put on hat and coat
  - Join other children and teacher at the door

Self-regulation develops very slowly
The Long Development of Self-Regulation

| Birth (Months) | (Prenatal) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| Self-regulation | (Years)     |   |   |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| Higher cognitive functions |             |   |   |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| Language |             |   |   |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| Sensory (seeing, hearing) |             |   |   |   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |

FIRST FIVE YEARS

“I can’t stop myself!”

Individual Differences

Individual differences in self-regulation:

The role of temperament
Effortful Control

“the ability to inhibit a dominant response to perform a subdominant response”

Which executive function does this resemble?

What do We Expect of Children?

A national survey by ZERO TO THREE asked parents of young children at what ages children should be capable of important developmental achievements.

At what age did parents expect that a young child could...
- Follow instructions like “go pick up your shoes”? 1.7 yrs
- Share and take turns with other children? 1.9 yrs
- Control his or her emotions, such as not having a tantrum when frustrated? 3.1 yrs

Are these realistic expectations? Are they consistent with the child's brain maturation?

Stress

Why does stress impair self-regulation?
How can we help young children with self-regulation?

Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation

How do we help children with self-regulation?

• Developmentally appropriate expectations
• Guide children with “do” – not “don’t” – statements
• Enable children to anticipate transitions
• Help children use words to regulate their actions and thinking
• Predictable but flexible daily schedule
• Options for children's self-regulation (e.g., quiet corner)
• Model emotional self-control, cognitive flexibility, attentional focus
• Recognize individual differences in self-regulation

Additional Resources

Harvard Center on the Developing Child
Building the Brain's “Air Traffic Control” System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function
Ross A. Thompson
Doing what doesn't come naturally: The development of self-regulation
ECLKC Mental Health Resources
https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health
Wrap-Up

Answering Your Questions

Thank you for joining us, please click the link to complete the evaluation for this webinar:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/FrontPorch_09-04-18

Thank you!