

Strategies to Start to Develop Self Regulation

Why Teach Self Regulation?

Self regulation (or emotional regulation) is important because of the part it plays in teaching children to learn to cope with life's stresses. It is one of the elements needed in acquiring resiliency.

Resiliency allows an individual to cope with stressful experiences and can be taught to young children. Self-regulation or emotional regulation is one of the seven abilities needed to develop resiliency. (<http://www.reachinginreachingout.com/>).

Resiliency requires learning seven key abilities which are:

1. Being in charge of our emotions (emotional regulation)
2. Controlling our impulses
3. Analyzing the cause of the problems
4. Maintaining realistic optimism
5. Having empathy for others
6. Believing in your own competence
7. Reaching out

As part of growing up, children are expected to learn to control their emotions and behave in a socially accepted manner.

“She needs to stop crying every time she can't get her own way.” “He needs to learn to control his temper.” “He needs to learn to deal with his frustration.” “She can't keep hitting her classmates when she gets frustrated.”

1 This information was researched by staff of RFECY and is adapted from the following references:
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Learning to control emotions is often referred to “self regulation” or “emotional regulation.” Self regulation is not all about emotions however. Self Regulation has been defined as “the ability to establish and maintain a mental and physical state that fits with the situation at hand.” (Dr. Theresa Bolick)

Dr Bolick breaks self regulation into 4 critical components:

1. Arousal or how alert the child is
2. Attention – too much or not enough to the environment
3. Activity, this is not only how much the child moves but how much the child has control over this movement
4. Affect or emotion – recognizing, understanding and expressing emotions

We often focus on teaching emotional awareness in isolation from the other components of self regulation. A socially able child depends on a growing emotional competence as he understands, expresses and regulates his own emotions. This regulation depends on his mastery and competence in the other physical areas, (that is, regulating his arousal or alertness state and his activity level.). Expressing and regulating his own emotions also requires an understanding of the mental states of others and being able to govern his own behavior in keeping with the rules and regulations of a situation.

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The following information will focus on self regulation development and strategies.

The inability to self regulate may have the triggers buried in the following areas:

- Executive functioning skills including organization and planning (for example, organizing or problem solving a plan to deal with frustration).
- Language processing skills including labeling emotions accurately, categorizing and expressing emotions and identifying and articulating one's needs.
- Cognitive flexibility skills which are often lacking in children because they lack the world experience necessary to develop a flexible view in problem solving.
- Social skills that are lacking or needing to be retained. Social skills require complex, interrelated thinking and flexibility. Anxiety or irritability can cause a child to be less flexible and more easily frustrated. Some children have a preference for predictability and routines and struggle when life is not predictable or does not follow a familiar routine.

It is important to be aware of the child's strengths and needs to help determine if any of these triggers are present. Weaknesses in any of these areas will make it difficult for a child to learn to self regulate. Strategies aimed at remediating these areas or accommodating weakness in these areas will be necessary while teaching self regulation.

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How and What to Teach about Self Regulation (in no particular order):

- Self regulation cannot be imposed on a child. It is something that is taught to a child and must involve the child throughout all the steps. Remember to involve the child in the investigation, the planning of the strategies and problem solving if an emotional outburst occurs.
- Help the child recognize his physical, mental and emotional states. Label behavior in terms of physical, mental, emotional state (Dr Bolok). Work with an Occupational Therapist (if there is one) regarding sensory issues. Be aware of what environmental sounds, smells or sights affect the child in a positive or negative way. Be aware of what smells or types of touch affect the child. Draw the child's attention to these. Point out how the child physically and emotionally feels. For example, "I notice when we go to the noisy gym that you clench your fists and run a lot. You look like you are excited." "I notice that when we turn the lights down and lay down, your shoulders come down and you look happy."
- Teach strategies to change the child's physical state. Teach relaxation or calming strategies. Teach strategies for "perking up", that is becoming more alert when needed. Look at diet and exercise as a way to help regulate a physical state as well as an emotional state. Keep a chart of these states and strategies.
- Identify situations that are difficult for the child's sensory, motor and regulatory state. As the child becomes more aware of his state teach him to be aware of the environment and its impact on him.

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Talk to him about what is overwhelming. Take note what situations vary (tough one day and not the next) to look for subtle differences in the environment or in him that have helped him regulate.

- Once you are aware of the situations that affect the child, identify strategies that help prevent deregulation. Work with child to make modifications to his environment, for example, give him something to block the noise in a loud environment. Teach the child to balance his activities and gradually introduce him to more challenging situations.
- Supplement teaching with books on manners, social skills, recognizing emotions and behavior in response to emotions.
- Teach an awareness of emotional states in others. Point out facial expressions and “body language.” Teach these (facial expressions and body language) in person and through pictures, videos, and television programs or commercials with the sound turned off.
- Monitor your own emotional states and talk about these to the child. For example, “My neck and my hands are stiff (physical state) and I’m cranky (emotional state) and I’m frustrated (mental state) because I had to drive in a lot of traffic.”
- Observe and learn the child’s agitation leading up to an emotional outburst (a “rumbling stage”). Observe the environment, including the physical environment and the people and the social interactions to help determine what is contributing to the child’s stress.

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- Use visual strategies to help the child understand the change (increase or decrease) in his physical, emotional or mental state. For example, stress charts or thermometer or the “Incredible 5 Point Scale” by Kari Dunn Buron.
- Look at a variety of teaching strategies, including instructions in the social situation and rehearsal using games, story books and videos.
- Talk about the child’s emotions in response to others. How does he feel when he gets to be first, or get a treat or when he is told “no” by someone?

Teaching self awareness is not enough; the child must be taught what to do with these physical, emotional and mental states. This involves teaching appropriate social responses (we cannot burst into song on the sidewalk when we are happy) and ways to regulate one’s self, (how to reassure ourselves when we are afraid or how to calm down when we are upset.)

- Use a “social skill autopsy” (Richard Lavoie) after an emotional outburst. A social skill autopsy is used to help understand social mistakes by dissecting the event and the environment. The child learns what happened, what went wrong, and plans for the next time. A social skill autopsy is not punishment but is supportive and solution oriented. It is an opportunity for the child to participate and is a process for interpretation that is constructed by a significant adult to help the child be successful next time.

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- Play “what if” games with different scenarios.
- Use self talk to model working through your own emotional state. “I’m hungry now, that makes me sleepy and so I will have some juice to perk me up.” “I’m so frustrated after driving in traffic; I will sit down and listen to music for ten minutes to calm down.”
- Use past experiences to teach problem solving. Point how this current situation is the same or similar to one experienced earlier. Help the child to remember what worked or did not work last time. Suggest alternative responses if necessary.
- Teach the child what to do when he makes a mistake. Teach him that it is OK to make a mistake and that there will be another opportunity. Encourage him to think positively about himself and not to dwell on mistakes. Remind him when he had success.
- Help the child see that his choices of behavior are not necessarily good or bad but options that can give him or not give him what he desires. Define the problem and state a goal. Help him brainstorm options for his behavior and list or draw pictures of the options. Help him evaluate the outcome of each choice and select the best option

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