

SELF-REGULATION | THE EARLY YEARS

What is self-regulation?

The early years are a time of extraordinary growth and development. A baby's capacity for self-regulation—how she manages energy expenditure in response to stressors and then recovers from the effort—is wired during these critical years. Trajectories are set early and once set can be difficult to change later in life.

Anyone concerned with the healthy development of a young child needs to pay close attention to the child's self-regulation, helping her feel safe and secure, and calming her when she's startled.

Unfortunately, there are numerous interpretations of the term “self-regulation” in psychological literature. In particular, “self-regulation” is often confused with self-control. Self-control is not self-regulation. Behaviour modification techniques and programs designed to instill self-control in young children can have short term success. However, this approach might also lead to

additional longer term problems in mood, attention and behaviour.

Similarly, social emotional learning (SEL) programs in the education system designed to teach emotion-regulation, while promising, have not yet demonstrated robust long term outcomes. However, there is an intimate link between SEL and self-regulation; helping children develop effective self-regulation in the early years sets the underlying foundation for successful SEL over their whole lives.

At its core, self-regulation refers to the manner in which a child recovers from the expenditure of energy required to deal with stressors. Prolonged and excessive stress (allostatic overload) can significantly affect “higher” functions such as language, social cognition, executive functions and, indeed, self-control.

A child that is chronically hypo- or hyper-aroused as a result of excessive stress more readily goes into fight-or-flight, or freezes.

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Recognizing stress and stressors

Stressors come from five interconnected domains: biological, emotional, cognitive, social and pro-social. Heightened stress in any or, as is generally the case, several (if not all), of these domains leads to negative downstream consequences. Identifying and reducing stressors is the first step towards easing a child's stress levels and bringing her back to a calm and focused state, and ultimately improving her ability to self-regulate.

Stressors can vary significantly. What is a stressor for one child may not be for another; and even for the same child, what may be a stressor in one moment may not be in another when the child is in a different physical or emotional state. Some common stressors for children in the early years are:

- The child's biology—for example, her sensory/motor system
- Poor sleep regime
- Poor diet (high in processed foods)
- Lack of physical activity
- Stressors in the environment—for example, too much noise, light or crowding.

Clinical studies have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to enhance children's self-regulation, and that doing so results in meaningful improvements in any or all of the above five domains.

5 steps of self-regulation

There is no such thing as a “quick fix,” or one solution to help young children to self-regulate. Rather than thinking of self-regulation as a universal program, we need to reframe self-regulation as an educational process. There are five critical steps that parents and other caregivers can take to address these issues and help children return to calm.

1. Read the signs of stress and reframe the behaviour
2. Recognize the stressors
3. Reduce the stress
4. Reflect
5. Respond

These steps can also be applied to groups of children, or indeed, to the caregivers themselves, and will vary in execution across centres, classrooms, communities and families.

Next steps

These are proven steps towards having a happier and healthier child. With the right kind of support, the results can happen fast.

Contact The MEHRIT Centre at info@self-reg.ca or visit www.self-reg.ca for further information.

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This resource was developed by the Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities, in partnership with Dr. Stuart Shanker and The MEHRIT Centre. It is freely available to use in support of creating welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments for children and youth. Download this resource and more at www.safeandcaring.ca and www.self-reg.ca.

