

Counselor's Corner

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How Can We Help Kids With Self-Regulation?

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to a change in expectations and to handle frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables children, as they mature, to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

What does emotional dysregulation look like?

Problems with self-regulation manifest in different ways depending on the child, says Dr. Matthew Rouse, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Some kids are instantaneous — they have a huge, strong reaction and there's no lead-in or build-up," he says. "They can't inhibit that immediate behavior response." For other kids, he notes, distress seems to build up and they can only take it for so long. Eventually it leads to some sort of behavioral outburst. "You can see them going down the wrong path but you don't know how to stop it."

The key for both kinds of kids is to learn to handle those strong reactions and find ways to express their emotions that are more effective (and less disruptive) than having a meltdown.

Why do some kids struggle with self-regulation?

Dr. Rouse sees emotional control issues as a combination of temperament and learned behavior. "A child's innate capacities for self-regulation are temperament and personality-based," he explains. Some babies have trouble self-soothing, he adds, and get very distressed when you're trying to bathe them or put on clothes. Those kids may be more likely to experience trouble with emotional self-regulation when they're older.

But the environment plays a role as well. When parents give in to tantrums or work overtime to soothe their children when they get upset and act out, kids have a hard time developing self-discipline. "In those instances the child is basically looking to the parents to be external self-regulators," Dr. Rouse says. "If that's a pattern that happens again and again, and a child is able to 'outsource' self-regulation, then that's something that might develop as a habit." Children with ADHD or anxiety may find it particularly challenging to manage their emotions, and need more help to develop emotional regulation skills.

How do we teach self-regulation skills?

Scott Bezsylo, the executive director of the Winston Prep schools for children with learning differences, says that acting out is essentially an ineffective response to a stimulus. The parent or teacher needs to help the child slow down and more

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carefully choose an effective response instead of being impulsive. "We approach self-regulation skills in the same way we approach other skills, academic or social: **isolate that skill and provide practice,**" Bezsylo explains. "When you think of it as a skill to be taught — rather than, say, just bad behavior — it changes the tone and content of the feedback you give kids."

The key to learning self-regulation skills, says Dr. Rouse, is not to avoid situations that are difficult for kids to handle, but to coach kids through them and provide a supportive framework — clinicians call it "scaffolding" the behavior you want to encourage — until they can handle these challenges on their own.

Imagine a situation that can produce strong negative emotions, like a frustrating math homework assignment. If a parent hovers too much, she risks taking over the regulation role. "Instead of the child recognizing that the work is frustrating and figuring out how to handle it," Dr. Rouse explains, "what he feels is that the parent is frustrating him by making him do it." Scaffolding in this situation might be helping the child with one problem, and then expecting him to try the rest. If he feels frustrated, he might get up and get a drink. He might use a timer to give himself periodic breaks. The parent would check in on him at intervals, and offer praise for his efforts.

If a child is prone to melting down when he's asked to stop playing a video game, scaffolding might be practicing transitioning away from the game. "You'd want to practice with a game in which he's not overly invested — you don't want to begin with high-stakes," Dr. Rouse explains. "Have him practice playing for two or three minutes and then handing you the game. He gets points towards something he wants every time he does it."

Teaching Self-Regulation (continued) ...

Practice runs

Dry runs are another way to scaffold self-regulation. For instance, if you've had trouble with a child reacting impulsively or having a tantrum in a store, make a short visit when you don't need to do serious shopping. Have her practice walking with you, keeping her hands to herself. She gets points towards some goal every time she is successful.

Dr. Rouse says that often parents get discouraged when things don't go well the first time they try skill-building, but consistency and starting at a level that is appropriate for your child are key. Rather than giving up, try paring down the activity so it is more doable, and slowly give your child more and more independence to handle it.

For instance, if brushing her teeth is a problem for your child, you might start by focusing just on putting toothpaste on the brush, and respond with positive feedback and rewards when she does it. Once she's practiced that a few times, add the next step in the chain.

Similarly, if getting out the door in the morning is causing meltdowns, target one step at a time. First, say, getting dressed by 7:15. Once she's mastered that, set a target time for breakfast, and add that. Breaking the chain into small steps allows her to build self-regulation skills in manageable increments.

Help kids become self-reflective

Bezylko stresses that when parents or teachers approach impulsive, inappropriate behavior calmly and give them time, kids can learn to choose better ways to respond to that situation. The feedback kids need is non-judgmental and non-emotional: what went wrong, and why, and how they can fix it next time.

"When kids are part of an environment that's reflective and analytic as opposed to emotional and fast-paced," Bezylko explains, "they can learn to make better choices." Slowing down allows children to become more thoughtful, reflective and self-aware. "We need to slow down and model self-reflection and self-awareness and self-regulation for our kids," he notes, "but it's also helpful and good for us, too."

Bezylko notes that mindfulness and meditation are good for everyone, but especially for children with self-regulation challenges. And Dr. Rouse mentions the many parent training programs available to help them become better coaches for their kids. For older kids, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is also an option, as it focuses on distress tolerance and emotion regulation.

At the end of the day, though, nothing can replace the work of the parent. "It seems to me," says Dr. Rouse, "that the family environment is the most important piece." (article borrowed from Childmind.org)



Components of Self-Regulation

- Sensory regulation
 - Sensitivity to input
 - Reactivity to input
 - Sensory Threshold
 - Sensory Processing
- Temperament characteristics
- Know how these components interact with one another and impact a child's behaviors

Black History and Presidents' Day book releases for kids, teens, and families

What is Given From the Heart by Patricia McKissack and April Harrison. In this story, James Otis and his Mama have had a rough month trying to make ends meet, but when a family in their church loses everything in a house fire, James Otis stretches himself to find a way to show them they are loved.

If your kids like historical fiction, *The Unsung Hero of Birdsong, USA* by Brenda Woods tells the story of 12-year-old Gabriel and his unlikely friendship with Meriwether, a Black WWII veteran in his small town in the South. How this child decides to confront the racism in his hometown becomes the crux of the story, and it's a tough reminder of how different Black and white vets were treated, even after serving their country the same way in wartime. *Rutherford B., Who Was He?: Poems About Our Presidents*. This look at the presidents through poetry is a fun addition to your President's Day reading. An author's note includes a very brief biography of each man. *John, Paul, George & Ben*. Of course, John and Paul were never president. This book is best appreciated by kids who already know their history, and also by adults. You may appreciate a children's book with jokes adults will find humorous. The book takes a couple of well-known characteristics about the men (*Hancock's signature, Washington and the cherry tree, etc.*) and turn them into a witty joke. Notes at the end of the book separate fact from fiction.

Choosing Books at the Right Reading Levels for Your Child:

Selecting books at the right reading levels makes for more enjoyment and less frustration for your growing reader.

Ages: 6-12

"Just-right" books help your child find the right reading levels and make reading more fun. Have your children try the "five-finger test" to select a book at their reading levels:

- Have your child choose a book he/she would like to read.
- Then have your child scan a page in the middle of the book.
- While looking at the five fingers on their hand and scanning the page of print, ask them to put one finger down for every word they cannot read or do not understand.

If your child has five fingers down when they have scanned to the bottom of the page, they will need to select another book at a different reading level. If your child has fewer than five fingers down when they get to the bottom of the page, then that book is "just right" and they can read it.

Your child may want to read a book that is "too hard" based on this test. That's okay. Just make it a book that you read aloud to them, or that you read together (perhaps alternating pages or chapters; or they read, but you sit alongside to answer questions or help them with challenging words).

This process will help your child pick the "just right" books and climb to more advanced reading levels!

"THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A KID WHO HATES READING. THERE ARE KIDS WHO LOVE READING, AND KIDS WHO ARE READING THE WRONG BOOKS."

JAMES PATTERSON