

Self-regulation: the what, the why and the how

Desley Jones



Desley has over 25 years' experience in early childhood education and is director of Ballymore Kindergarten in Brisbane. Desley is a recipient of a NEiTA ASG Inspirational Teaching Award. She was nominated for the award by kindergarten parents in recognition of her emphasis on children's social and emotional wellbeing in her educational program. In addition to teaching full-time Desley presents workshops and writes journal articles for educators.

Self-regulation: what is it?

Children experience ups and downs when they are trying to manage their feelings and behaviours ... helping them to find ways to balance this is called self-regulation (KidsMatter).

Berk (2001) describes self-regulation as the capacity to use thought to guide behaviour. She asserts that the self-regulated child follows rules, makes deliberate decisions, well-reasoned choices and decisions and takes responsibility for his or her own learning and behaviour. Early childhood is a crucial period for its development. It is a time when children learn to overcome impulses by thinking before they act.

Self-regulation is one of many terms used to refer to emotional regulation. Others include: emotional control, affect regulation, effortful control and emotion management. According to Nagel (2012, 153-54):

emotional regulation ... is the process where children increasingly gain greater control of the behaviours that allow them to achieve functional goals.

Nagel also identifies that the neural mechanisms underlying emotional regulation may be the same as many that underlie cognitive processes, including higher-order thinking processes such as sustained attention and working memory.



The importance of these higher-order thinking skills and their relation to self-regulation is investigated together with their impact on social emotional development and learning in a Working Paper produced by the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011). Executive functioning skills include:

- working memory (the capacity to hold and manipulate information over short periods of time)
- inhibitory control (the skill of mastering and filtering thoughts and impulses to resist

temptations, distractions and habits and to pause and think before acting)

- cognitive or mental flexibility (the capacity to nimbly switch gears and adjust to changed demands, priorities, or perspectives, and to apply different rules in different settings).

These skills are essential to 'the deliberate, intentional, goal-directed behaviour that is required for daily life and success at work.'
(Harvard University, 2011, 1)

Importance of self-regulation

Acquiring these early building blocks of executive functioning is one of the most important but challenging tasks of early childhood. These skills assist children to learn to read and write, to remember the steps in mathematical problems, to take part in class discussions or group projects, to enter into and sustain play with others, to plan and act in ways that make them good students, classroom citizens and friends, and to establish a foundation to study, sustain friendships, hold a job and manage in a crisis. These underlying skills are 'distinct from, but foundational to, school readiness and academic success.'
(Harvard, 2011, 4)

Fostering self-regulation

Self-regulation develops as a result of development and learning. It is linked to a range of cognitive abilities including language capacity and it takes time to develop. In terms of brain development, Nagel (2012) highlights the interconnectedness between the cerebrum (the portion of the brain that plays a role in complex adaptive processes such as learning, perception and motivation) and the limbic system which is widely assumed to play a role in emotion. Nagel (2012, 154) suggests:

This is one of the reasons why children may have temper tantrums in the first couple of years of their lives; increasing independence collides with emotional and verbal immaturity.

According to both Nagel and the Harvard University Working paper, the most essential elements of environments that foster self-regulation are **positive relationships** and the



scaffolding of children's development of their regulatory abilities.

Enhancing the development of executive functioning skills (and subsequent self-regulatory abilities) involves sensitive, responsive caregiving and individualized teaching in the context of situations that require making choices, opportunities for children to direct their own activities with decreasing adult supervision over time, effective support of early emotion regulation, promotion of sustained joint attention and the availability of adults who are not under such pressure that they cannot make time for children to practice their skills (Harvard, 2011).

Nagel recommends particular attention be given to:

- security, structure and routine
- adult-child relationships that demonstrate the principles of scaffolding – guiding children from complete dependence on adult support to a gradual assumption of the 'executive' role for themselves
- the establishment of a framework for scaffolding which includes routines, cues for behaviour, breaking big tasks into smaller chunks, thus helping children to use executive function skills to the best of their abilities

- the use of reasoning and explanations as a strategy for compliance rather than continuously reverting to power and control, which according to Nagel may derail emotional regulation (2012, 156-7).

When children feel respected, valued and acknowledged; when they experience a secure, supportive environment which encourages them to generate ideas, engage in personally meaningful experiences and see themselves as highly effective problem-solvers; and when the communication in the centre is one of caring, talking and listening, then a substantial foundation is laid for the enhancement of young children's self-regulatory abilities.

In considering more specific strategies to enhance self-regulation, preference needs to be given to those approaches which incorporate an understanding of children's cognitive (i.e. executive functioning skills) and language development and its role in emotional regulation.

Such strategies include, but are not limited to:

- describing emotions and physiological responses
- calming experiences
- encouraging private speech or self-talk
- discussing expectations, reasons, consequences
- pre-empting positive behaviour
- providing descriptive feedback as an alternative to praise
- problem-solving and conflict resolution
- reframing situations
- making reparation.

Make-believe play

Special mention should also be made of the role of make-believe play in children's development. In social pretending, preschoolers engage in lengthier interactions, are more involved, draw more children into their activity, and are more cooperative. In view of these findings, it is not surprising that four and five year olds who spend more time at socio-dramatic play are advanced in intellectual development and are judged more socially competent by their teachers. Furthermore, pretend play fosters a diverse array of specific cognitive and social

skills, which contribute to these broad-based outcomes. (Berk, 2001, p119)

Make-believe play provides opportunities for encouraging:

- a strong sense of agency for young children
- social activity
- mental flexibility including switching gears and seeing different perspectives
- inhibitory control through natural consequences (if you want to be part of the game, you may have to comply with the group rules of the game)
- problem-solving and a focus on goals
- using working memory in the recall of details for the game
- language use in planning and playing
- sustained attention over hours, days and even weeks
- scaffolding as children operate above their usual level in purposeful activities
- sensory input through building spaces, music, roles, props.

The development of self-regulation is a complex interplay of several areas of development. In supporting self-regulation, those working with young children require a holistic view of children's development together with a strong understanding of the role of relationships and the importance of high-quality environments in children's development and learning.

References:

Berk, L. E. 2001, *Awakening Children's Minds*. Oxford: University Press

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2011 *Building the Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function: Working Paper No. 11*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

KidsMatter. How self-regulation difficulties affect children. Retrieved from: http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/sites/default/files/public/KMEC_C4-201205-03_selfregulation-difficulties.pdf

Nagel, M. C. 2012 *In the Beginning: The brain, early development and learning*. Camberwell, Aust: ACER Press.