Self-regulation development: Strategies for working with children & parents

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About me...
Map for today

- What is self-regulation and how do I observe it in children?
- What factors impact on children’s self-regulation?
- How do I partner with parents around self-regulation?
- How do I support self-regulation development on a daily basis?
Our context....

- Push down of academics into early childhood
- Most children doing very well but still some are entering school with developmental vulnerabilities (22% in one domain and 11% in two or more)
- The transition to school is a challenging and pivotal time
- When it doesn’t go well, the achievement gap remains right across school
- Perhaps our foundational skills, the ones that allow us to be ready to learn at school are under threat
- **THESE ARE SELF-REGULATION SKILLS**
- Self-regulation skills trump IQ in predicting academic success
Self-regulation

“The capacity to regulate your own behaviour, emotions, and cognitions (thoughts) in ways that are beneficial to your functioning and adaptive to the circumstances in which you find yourself”

How we all manage our own feelings, thoughts, and behaviour.
Better self-regulation skills in early childhood...

• = better social skills across lifespan
• = better teacher-child relationships
• = better transition to school
• = less chance of obesity
• = better academic outcomes – even long-term
• = better mental health
• = less risk-taking in adolescence
• = lower risk of adult gambling
• = higher wages, better long-term health and employment prospects
Self-regulation components

Executive function

Emotional

Attentional

Behavioural
Executive function: Air traffic control system of the brain

- Inhibition
- Switching
- Working memory
All interwoven and related...

Not just with each other but with other areas of development like communication, motor skills etc.
A positive feedback loop....

Emotional regulation

Higher order cognitive regulation / executive function

Attentional regulation

Behavioural regulation
Negative influences on self-regulation?

The self-regulatory system deals with the most pressing issue at hand, putting all others on hold. Development arrested – momentarily or more long term.
Other issues that impact self-regulation?

• Temperament – at first, but then can learn to regulate
• Maternal depression
• Limited close, supportive relationships with adults
• Harsh and punitive approaches to behaviour management
• Sleep problems
• Disadvantaged backgrounds – but if can strengthen self-regulation than will be a buffer
• Autistic Spectrum Disorder
• Sensory Processing Disorder
• Other neurological differences
Observing self-regulation...

**Attentional:** Group time, completing tasks even when difficult, persist in face of distractions

**Cognitive:** memory games, multi-step instructions

**Emotional:** Intensity of reaction but also recovery time. Often simplest to observe but ....

CAUTION: Not all dysregulation of emotion is obvious and disruptive....

**Reactive undercontrol:** Tantrum.

**Reactive overcontrol:** Withdrawn.
Games to play for self-regulation observation (behavioural and executive function)

- **Simon Says** – inhibition, shifting, working memory
- **Musical Statues** – usual then reverse
- **Heads Shoulders Task** - video
Complex play or tasks in natural settings

Often many self-regulation components working together

Dramatic play

Puzzles
Questions so far?
My question to you.....
Supporting self-regulation development....
We all have a role to play...

• Early childhood professionals, parents, parenting supports, teachers, schools, the community

• Self-regulation is CHANGEABLE, particularly in the early years. Does not come just with maturity, but with practice.

• YOU are the only paid profession in the world required to alter the neurological pathways and brain chemistry that really matter on a daily basis

• ......... parents are the only UNPAID 😞
Partnering with Parents - 1

1. Make self-regulation a **regular part of language** (learning stories, portfolio etc).

   - **Today Jack was interested in the train puzzle. He had begun this puzzle yesterday but left it after a few minutes, finding it difficult. Today, he **went back** to the same puzzle showing great **persistence**. He stayed with the activity for a bit longer than yesterday and fit more pieces in than he did yesterday. I observed that Jack’s **regulation of his own attention** seems to be improving with him persisting for longer periods of time with many activities, even when they get tricky. I congratulated him on this skill and he seemed pleased. This is carrying over into group time with Jack’s skills in waiting his turn also increasing weekly. We will continue to provide some verbal support and prompting for this **regulation of attention** and lots of positive reinforcement.**
Partnering with Parents - 2

2. **Take the personal out** of self-regulation – is not a behaviour ‘problem’ but behaviour problems can be a result. Approach it as another developmental skills that all children are learning at different rates.

3. **Explain and be clear about what the different expectations** might be at home vs early education setting (with positive adjustment to school the ultimate goal)

4. **Make group goals** around self-regulation, as well as individual learning goals

5. Show **empathy** if self-regulation an issue at home, you may not always see it in your setting

6. Use similes like ‘**the air traffic control system of the brain**’

7. Arrange **information seminars** for parents on managing sleep, diet, and children’s behaviour in constructive ways where possible
What can you do – in general?

1. **Lower or eliminate expectations** when crisis – overloaded air traffic control system
2. **Adjust expectations** in cases of neurological or sensory difference (e.g. ASD, sensory processing disorder etc)
3. Remember developmental path of **other regulated, co-regulation, self-regulation**
4. **Co-regulate** when required – soothe, talk, listen, be with, scaffold, withdraw
5. Know that children with **genetically higher reactivity** will need stronger self-regulation skills
6. Understand and remember the **self-regulation feedback loop**
7. **Reward, focus on, and document** the self-regulation processes in learning / play activities, not the outcomes
8. If particular children are having problems, don’t single them out but make a **group goal** about self-regulation and **provide extra support** to those children
9. Make a plan to **withdraw** extra support in scaffolded realistic way over time
What helps - 1

• **Self-talk** – model it and allow it
  • Children who implement more self-talk early on show better self-regulation development over time.
  • They will internalise it as they mature

• **Book reading**
  • More books in the home and more time in shared reading = higher attentional and emotional self-regulatory development
  • Sit and focus time
  • Learning language for emotions, discussing character’s feelings, problem solving a self-regulation problem for a character
What helps - 2

- **Active music making sessions**
  - American children in kindermusik classes used more self-talk and had better self-regulation skills compared to those not in kindermusik
  - Australian children who have more frequent parent-child song-singing at home (2-3 years old), had better attentional regulation, numeracy, and social skills at 4-5 years old, even when amount of book reading controlled for
  - Music has lots of opportunities for: Maintaining attention, stop (inhibition), wait, take turns, motor coordination
  - See my blogpost on music and self-regulation:
  - [http://theearlychildhoodresearcher.wordpress.com/](http://theearlychildhoodresearcher.wordpress.com/)
What helps - 3

CIRCLE GAMES like.....

Red Light, Purple Light

- Teacher as stoplight at one end of room, children at other.
- Teacher holds up different coloured cardboard circles to represent stop and go (e.g. purple stop, orange go). Then make opposite (e.g. purple go, orange stop). Can also do shapes (e.g. circle go, square is stop – any colour)

Conductor

- Use a baton to direct playing and put down to stop.
- Then ask to follow in reverse
- Wave fast for fast and slow for slow, then ask to respond in reverse (play slow when baton fast etc)

Heads Shoulders as per prior video
What helps - 4

- **Emotion coaching**
  - Giving words to use, encouraging empathy, using the non-reactive times (or the reactive times of others / ‘pretend’ problems) to coach emotional regulation

- **Yoga**
- **Martial Arts**
- **Dramatic play**
- **Monitor your own self-regulation**
  - Role model by making explicit

**Embedding self-regulation in all play**

and rewarding the self-regulation, not the specific skill required of the task. Scaffold as you would other developmental areas. See reading.
A note about sleep as part of the problem & solution - 1

• Sleep self-regulation:
  • Able to get off asleep when alone
  • Happy to stay asleep alone
  • No waking at night, or waking but not needing adult help to get back to sleep
  • Seemingly calm, non-restless sleep

• Sleep plays a role in the development of higher order brain functions

• Sleep also represents a daily opportunity to practice self-regulation. At first supported by adults and then independently with age

• Sleep may be an important part of the cycle in that lack of quality sleep results in higher reactivity, requiring more attention to emotional regulation and giving less opportunity for attentional, behavioural and cognitive regulation development.
A note about sleep as part of the problem & solution - 2

• Enforced daytime naps for children who aren’t needing them (very few children over 2 or 3) can cause problems at night
• If parents report this as an issue, take this seriously and move to active quiet time (e.g. reading a book, listening to an audio book etc)
• Enforced daytime naps in centres also have a negative impact on emotional climate in those rooms – good sign to move to active quiet time or another option (differentiated for children perhaps if possible)
• Consistent bedtime and routine around this and growing independence in children (at home at night) important – info seminars?
Suggested next options for you......

- **Think of a child you work with** who might be struggling with self-regulation. Which aspects of self-regulation? How do you observe it? What factors in and outside of your setting might be contributing to this issue?

- **Conduct a whole group activity** that might let you observe some of the self-regulation skills in your group – e.g. heads and shoulders game, reverse musical statues

- Choose a play / learning activity that children in your group often engage in and **analyse** this with your team in terms of which self-regulation elements are tapped / required and how you could support growth in these elements.

- **Design a floor time / group activity** that could stimulate self-regulation development for all children.
Useful links

- My blog: http://theearlychildhoodresearcher.wordpress.com/
- Google Kate Williams QUT eprints for my papers http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Williams,_Kate.html
- Early childhood music program Boppin’ Babies www.boppinbabies.com.au
- Run your own music program with resources from Kids Music Beat: www.musicbeat.com.au