

# Self-Regulation: What is it?

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**Self-regulation** refers to our ability to control our thinking, behaviours, emotional reactions and social interactions to achieve our goals or react appropriately to the situation – even if it is difficult to do. Even adults struggle with self-regulation: when we say we are full, but continue nibbling snacks in front of us; when we know we don't need another pair of shoes, but give in because they are on sale. The same applies to children, except they have an even harder time than we do.

Research has shown us the importance of our ability to self-regulate. Children who are better able to self-regulate are more likely to do well at school, experience more positive relationships and succeed in life.

Children are not born with the ability to self-regulate; these skills develop slowly and over time, and are sensitive to influences and experiences both inside and outside the home. Research has shown that the years between 3 and 5 years of age are a particularly significant time to learn and acquire the skills necessary for self-regulation. This shows the importance of providing children with experiences that develop self-regulatory abilities.

## Picture this...

1. It's lunchtime at preschool and the educator invites everyone to come and sit down to have lunch. The children are asked to hold off eating until all children have been served so they can join together in thanking the cook before they start eating. One child, however, begins eating as soon as their food is in front of them.
2. A child is at home with his younger sister, who is playing with a toy that he really wants. He knows he shouldn't grab the toy away from his sister. Even still, he looks at his parent knowingly, and grabs the toy away, leaving his younger sister in tears.
3. You drop your child at preschool and need to make a quick exit to get to work, but your child is really unsettled and distressed by your quick getaway. The educator tries his best to calm her down and include her in the activities going on in the centre. Despite these efforts she refuses to participate or respond to any of the educators requests.



## What is required for Self-Regulation?

Leading explanations suggest there are at least three aspects that are necessary for a child (or adult) to successfully self-regulate:

1. **A child must decide to act in a self-regulated way.** In our first scenario, if the child was new to the preschool and was unaware of this custom, would it be fair to view the child as poorly regulated? Likely not. Because the child was not aware of the custom, they never had a fair opportunity to decide whether to wait to eat.
2. **A child needs strategies to persist and maintain motivation when it becomes difficult to remain self-regulated.** In our second example, the child is aware that they should not grab the toy away from their sibling, but waiting for their turn has just become too much.
3. **A child needs the capacity to overcome urges and impulses that are contrary to their goals or the requirements of their situation.**

# Self-regulation: So what can we do?

There are everyday things that parents, educators and caregivers can do to provide experiences and opportunities for children to be self-regulated. We are currently conducting research to evaluate exactly this. When it comes to young children's learning, practice makes perfect. This means giving your child lots of opportunities to engage in goal setting, problem solving, decision-making and opportunities to 'work out' their self-regulation skills. Self-regulation also requires children to be persistent and motivated when faced with challenges.

## Goal setting

**1. Make rules explicit.** Behaviour is context-specific; what is appropriate in one context may not be acceptable in another. Engagement in appropriate behaviours depends on children's ability to understand what is expected in a given context or situation. If you can involve children in setting rules, this will give them a chance to think about which behaviours are appropriate across different situations and will give them a sense of ownership of the rules.

**2. Help children understand why desired behaviours are important or necessary.** We have all heard the explanation 'Because I said so' when asking why we need to do something. This does little to help a child understand why doing something is important or necessary, nor does it make them especially more likely to do this in future. A more productive response to 'Why do I need to clean up?', for example, might involve explaining this ensures we can find our toys next time.



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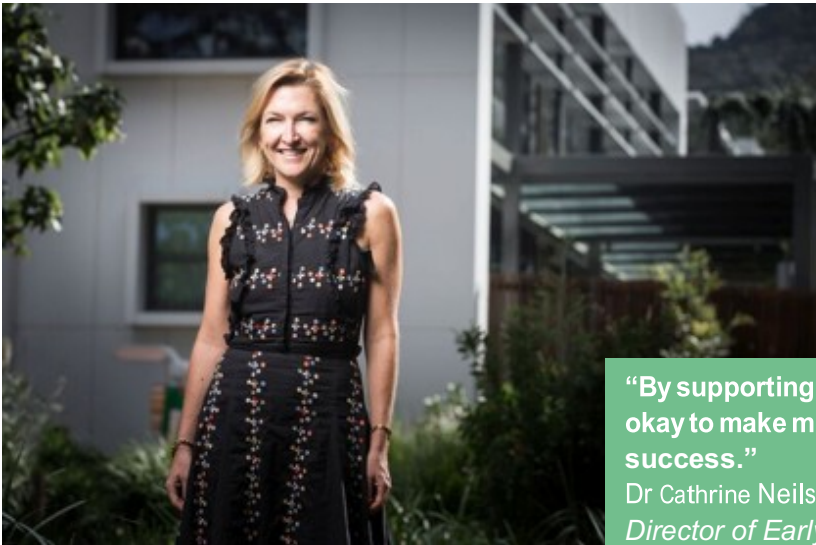
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- 3. Encourage children to lead and make choices.** Experiences that encourage children to lead and make choices provides them with the opportunity to regulate their own thinking and behaviours, while also considering the needs and perspectives of others. It is important that opportunities for decision-making are genuine. For example, asking a child if they would like to stop playing to come inside and wash up is not really a choice (unless you are prepared to accept the child's answer of 'no'). Where children have difficulties self-regulating, providing too many choices may be overwhelming. In these instances, restricted choice (e.g., would you like to eat a banana or an apple?) may be better suited to these children's developmental progress.
- 4. Model self-regulation skills.** Much of what children learn as they develop is influenced by observing the behaviours of influential adults (and other children). The development of self-regulation is no exception. Throughout the day children receive a lot of confusing messages, for example, when we say we shouldn't eat more chocolate but reach in to the bowl to get another one. If we are able to model expected or appropriate behaviours ourselves, children are more likely to decide to act in these ways as well.

## Problem Solving

- 1. Provide experiences and materials that encourage investigation.** Wooden blocks and recycled products for construction, old buttons and beads for patterning, torches, magnets and empty containers. Rotate the materials to make them thought provoking and engaging.
- 2. Practice problem-solving in the context of play experiences.** If a toy is no longer working or your child's play has broken down, support them in finding their own solutions. Many key skills are acquired in the context of play, as this is when your child is most motivated and confident, and therefore more likely to persevere when challenged.
- 3. Extend investigations through open-ended questions.** Ask why, what if, and how? How did you get the ball to bounce so high? Why do you think your tower fell down? Why do you think the caterpillar turned into a butterfly? Even more important than the questions you ask your child are the questions they ask you. Share in their investigations and show genuine interest when they discover something or solve a problem for themselves.
- 4. Support their planning and encourage your child to reflect on the process.** "Tell me how you used the playdough to make the snake?", the very act of talking makes children more aware of their own behaviour and the choices they make.



- 5. Provide challenges and stay nearby.** If young children are faced with challenges that are far beyond their developmental capacity they are much more likely to give up and walk away. By supporting your child to solve problems, and teaching them it is okay to make mistakes, they are more likely to persist and experience success.

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## Capacity

- 1. Minimise the factors that can undermine the ability to self-regulate.** It can be useful to view self-regulation as a muscle: just as we can do things to exercise and strengthen it, there will also be instances where its strength can be temporarily depleted. Situations that can deplete our ability to self-regulate include a lack of sleep, hunger, stress and so on. It is important to recognise situations where a child's ability to self-regulate may be undermined and attempt to minimise (or remedy) these factors. Doing so will put children in a better position to engage with experiences that may extend these skills.
- 2. Give children the opportunity to 'work out' and 'stretch' their abilities to be self-regulated.** Like a muscle, children benefit from 'working out' their ability to self-regulate. Activities that support this introduce opportunities for children to engage and challenge their self-regulation, including: overcoming urges and impulses (e.g., Simon Says, Statue game, delaying gratification); using problem solving strategies (e.g., strategies to redirect attention or recover effectively when upset); and setting goals and talking about these choices (e.g., why they chose these goals, why some went unfulfilled).