

# Developing Self-Regulation

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## What is self-regulation?

The ability to regulate behaviour is one of the most important things we need to be able to do to be successful in life. The good news is it develops slowly throughout our lives and adults can support children to become better regulated. Difficulties with developing self-regulation can result in rejection from others which can lead to isolation or poor relationships. In turn, this can have a negative impact on a person's mental health.

Self-regulation is:

- ◆ The ability to control emotions and behaviour towards a chosen goal (Timmons, Pelletier & Corter, 2016)
- ◆ A strong predictor of academic achievement and success (Ponitz, et al., 2009)
- ◆ The control we have over our thoughts, feelings and actions

## The theoretical bit.....

Vygotsky, a Soviet Psychologist, noticed that children develop self-regulation through working with more able people (usually adults) on activities. He observed that adults regularly used language to explain and coach children who would then use similar language when the adult was not present. Over time, the language about how to solve problems or carry out tasks becomes internalised and part of the child's thought processes.

Maslow developed a "hierarchy of needs" in 1943 with 5 categories which described what motivates human behaviour. We are motivated to meet our basic needs first for physical survival like food and shelter, and only once those are met is our behaviour motivated by what are called 'higher order' needs. When each level is fulfilled it is the next level which motivates our behaviour.

As a basis for developing self-regulation is helpful to think about children in terms of each stage of the hierarchy and ask whether there are any unmet needs:

Do they feel safe at home/in school?

Do they have positive relationships with peers and adults?

Do they feel like they belong and are loved?

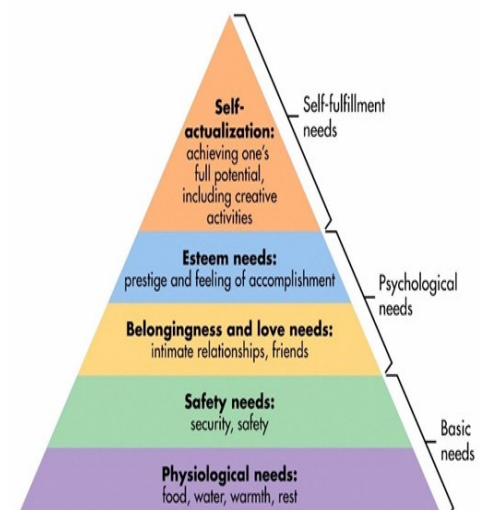
Knowing what need is unmet can help put in place the right support and help understand what the child can be supported to achieve.

**Self-regulation is more than having the willpower not to eat chocolate!**

**The ability to monitor, control, manage and plan our own behaviour, emotions or thoughts, and adjust them to the demands of different situations.**

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## Why is self-regulation important?

It allows children to manage their emotions and behaviour so that they can engage in activities with peers in a meaningful way (Vygotsky, 1978). When we are regulated we can:

- Manage and direct our bodies
- Be effective learners
- Focus our attention
- Channel emotions appropriately
- Respond appropriately to stimulation
- Delay gratification

**Out of adult's  
mouth, into  
children's  
ears, out of  
children's  
mouths into  
children's  
minds.**

## What can we do to help it develop?

We can develop this skill in our children by encouraging them to use self-talk (see page 3 for cycle) and by developing "scripts" - predictable language which they associate with everyday routines, conversations and tasks.

- ◆ Adults can model self-talk/ 'thinking aloud' when they respond to their own and their child's social and emotional needs.
- ◆ Adults can use scripts to encourage positive interactions (label the problem & say reason why, offer a way to deal with it, provide reassurance). See page 4 for examples.
- ◆ Through their play children practice and develop skills required for self-regulation and problem solving within a safe environment.
- ◆ Allow children to explore conflict by waiting and listening BEFORE intervening.
- ◆ Use scripts frequently for routines that are important for child.
- ◆ Some children might need visual prompts to support understanding.
- ◆ Use scripts mainly under positive, non-stressful situations, using a positive style of interaction.

## Self-regulated learners can.....

- ◆ understand their own abilities and needs
- ◆ set reasonable goals for themselves
- ◆ make plans to achieve their goals
- ◆ organise behaviour, thinking and positive self-talk
- ◆ inhibit impulses
- ◆ initiate strategies at the right time
- ◆ monitor own performance and evaluate it in relation to goals
- ◆ think and act strategically and solve problems in an organised manner
- ◆ learn from consequences
- ◆ transfer skills from one context to another
- ◆ shift flexibly from one activity, thought or strategy to another

## Signs children find self-regulation tricky?

- ◆ Poor attention control
- ◆ Unawareness or lack of engagement with tasks, interactions and routines
- ◆ Impulsive behaviour
- ◆ Disorganised thinking, talking, behaving
- ◆ Poor social judgement
- ◆ Inability to learn from the consequences of behaviour



## Self-Regulation Cycle

Self-regulation skills can be taught and develop well when we talk to children before, during and after they have done something.

We can imagine a cycle, where we:

- ◆ Set goal
- ◆ Predict barriers and needs
- ◆ Make a plan
- ◆ Do it, monitoring as you go
- ◆ Review the success of the plan
- ◆ Modify and set new goal and so on



## Feelings come first

When children are feeling anxious, angry or sad we need to help them with that first. Work through feelings by acknowledging them and naming them; label what you think they are feeling and saying; check with them if you are right. Say 'It seems to me you might be feeling x. Is that right? Or 'I'm wondering if you are feeling x, y or even z. What do you think?'

Feelings thermometers, traffic lights and 5-point scales can be used.

- ◆ You look upset. Is there anything I can do?
- ◆ OK, you're not ready. No problem; just let me know when you're ready?
- ◆ I'll know you're ready when I see you/ we look at this....
- ◆ I'll wait.

### The Incredible 5 point scale

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| 5 |  | <b>Angry</b><br>I've lost control. I'm not listening anymore. I could hit, kick or bite. I need a quiet place to calm down. |
| 4 |  | <b>Overwhelmed</b><br>Everything is too hard. I'm losing control and need to leave the environment I'm in. Give me space    |
| 3 |  | <b>Frustrated</b><br>I'm not getting it. I'm showing signs of stress. I should take a break now.                            |
| 2 |  | <b>Anxious</b><br>Trying to stay focused, but having a hard time staying on task. Use calming strategies now                |
| 1 |  | <b>Happy</b><br>Ready and willing to Work   |

## What you can say

### To help children decide what their goal is

What are we going to do?  
How will we know when we are done?  
What are we here for?  
We'll know we are done when it looks like...

### To help children make plans

"OK, so what's the plan?"  
"What'll you need to get this done?"  
"How will you and I know you'll need help?"  
"What will help look like?"  
"Don't tell me what you don't want, tell me what you do want."  
"OK, so what do you want me to do?"

### To monitor how their plans/actions are going

"So, how's it going?"  
"Is that helping you? Not helping?"  
"Is there anything else you can do?"  
"Is there anything I can do to help you?"  
"So when are you going to start?"

### At the end of an activity

"So how'd it go?"  
"How'd you do?"  
"Tell me exactly what happened ... and then what?"  
"What do you think other people thought?"  
"What were you thinking when you ..."  
"Next time you do this, what'll you do differently? The same?"  
"What helped?"  
"What didn't help?"

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## Pause for thought

Factors which help self-regulation to develop:

- ◆ Maturation in brain, especially frontal lobes
- ◆ Stability, organisation and predictability at home
- ◆ Emotional attachment to key adult(s)
- ◆ Adequate opportunities to exercise control over events
- ◆ "Authoritative/Responsive" parenting style
- ◆ Environment that models, values and rewards self regulation, autonomy and personal responsibility
- ◆ Effective language development
- ◆ Positive adult-child interactions
- ◆ Development of coherent and positive sense of self (adapted from Ylvisaker & Feeney, 2008)

## Further information & resources



[Short video explaining self-regulation](#)

[Maggie Dent explains self-regulation and why it is important](#)

[Dr Hazel Harrison describes how to build resilience and develop patience](#)

[Primary teacher models emotional self regulation](#)



[Aberdeenshire EPS self regulation and feelings website section](#)

[Lesson plan to introduce Big Deal Little Deal in school](#)

[ALERT Programme – Self regulation made easy: How does my Engine Run?](#)

[The Incredible 5-point Scale](#)

[The Zones of Regulation](#) -emotional regulation programme, website and book by Leah Kuypers



[Tim Feeney Addressing Barriers to Learning: Supporting self regulation](#)

## Using scripts in different situations

Using scripts is a way of giving students the words to describe the problem they are facing and how to resolve it. Adults use the scripts repeatedly, children get used to them and internalise them into "self-talk" and will begin using them to develop their strategic thinking over time. Scripts should be positive and used mainly under positive circumstances.

You can develop scripts for the following situations:

**Big deal-Little deal**

**Easy-Hard**

**Ready-not ready**

**Choice-no choice**

**Scary-Not Scary**

**Like-Don't like**

Here are two examples:

| Easy-Hard  | Big deal-Little deal  |
|--|---|
| <p>This is quite hard/ medium hard/ easy to do isn't it.</p> <p>It is hard/easy to do because....</p> <p>It is hard to do, ok, so we need to make a plan....</p> <p>Maybe you should ask for help? Or..</p> <p>You know we've got to work this out let's try...</p> <p>I know this is hard, but we've got to do this.</p> <p>Great, that was hard to do but you asked for help and we did it.</p> <p>There is always something that works, isn't there?</p> <p>There is always something that we can do.</p> | <p>Is this is big deal or a little deal?</p> <p>This is just a little deal because....it is not important/ not worth fighting for/ it just needs a small change/ it can be ignored/ you can get over it quickly/ it does not change anything important/ it is a temporary problem which will pass.</p> <p>This is just a little deal because we can.....</p> <p>There we go. You see , that was not a big deal.</p> <p>If it is a big deal, we might need a plan. How would you feel it we tried.... What could you/ I do to help/ change things?..</p> <p>Can we make this into a little deal? What if we....?</p> |