

TEACHING YOUR CHILD TO SELF-REGULATE

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Self-regulation is a set of skills that children develop as they mature that help them direct their emotions to a goal – despite what other people do, or how they feel in the moment.

Parents and the childless alike are all familiar with tantrums. If it is a two-year-old melting down in the store, it seems normal. However, school-aged children are expected to be better behaved. If your kid is still exhibiting frequent tantrums beyond the average age, they may have difficulties with emotional self-regulation.

Self-regulation is one's ability to control their emotions and behaviors. Toddlers are expected to have low self-regulation, but the older a child gets the more they should develop in this area. Most parent training programs aim to help kids develop these skills at the appropriate age.

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

A child who struggles with self-regulation will manifest in a couple different ways. For some children, their extreme emotions will be instantaneous and uncontrollable. So there will be no lead-up, just a sudden explosion. Other children will let their frustrations build up, and once they can take it no more, they also explode. You can usually see the outburst coming, but you may have no idea how to stop it.

Both types of children need to learn how to funnel their emotions into a more effective response. Emotional self-regulation issues are often born out of a mix of natural disposition and learned behavior. Some children naturally struggle with self-soothing, and their innate difficulties in this area may lead to emotional dysregulation later on.

However, the environment still plays a role. Parents who hover and bend-over-backwards to help soothe their distressed child may be doing more harm than good. In these types of situations, the child begins to rely on the parent as an external self-regulator. This reliance gets in the way of children developing the skills to soothe and calm themselves.

TEACHING SELF-REGULATION

Children who act out are just ineffectually responding to negative stimuli. Parents and teachers need to work with the child to calm them and slow them down. You should approach the teaching of self-regulation, just as you would approach a subject like math or music. The skill needs to be identified and practiced. It may be helpful to switch your thinking on the matter to a skill to be taught rather than correcting bad behavior. This will change your attitude and your effectiveness in dealing with the child.

When teaching a child to self-regulate, the goal is not to avoid situations where they will struggle – but rather to coach them through those situations. Set up a set process whereby you can assist the child – without taking over – until the child is ready to handle those situations on their own. For example: If you assist them with their homework, perhaps you only help them with one problem and then you tell them to work through the rest on their own. If they begin to feel frustrated, they can get up for a short walk or a drink of water. They could use a timer to give themselves breaks. All the while, you would only check in periodically and offer encouragement and praise for their endeavors

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Another way to help your child work through their struggles is to slowly introduce them to stressful situations. For example: If your child frequently breaks down in the middle of the grocery store, you might take them for a short trip when you don't have any urgent errands or shopping needs. Have the child practice walking next to you and keeping their hands to themselves. For every time they are successful, you could offer points towards a reward.

Consistency is key. Don't get frustrated the first time you practice the skill and it doesn't go well. If things continue to go poorly, you could try simplifying the activity so it is easier for the child to complete. It is important that the level of difficulty is well suited for the needs of your child; if it is too hard, you and your child will quickly become discouraged and give up. Start small, and slowly give your child more independence when handling those tasks. As they begin to master the smaller things you can expand to the next step.

REFLECT

If a child has a sudden outburst, it is beneficial if parents and teachers give them time to calm down and think of a better response to the situation. Kids need non-judgmental and soothing feedback on where and why things went wrong, and how they can avoid that in the future. Kids can learn to make better decisions when they are in an environment that is contemplative and deliberate. We also need to model this kind of behavior to our children. It is extremely beneficial for them to see it in action, and it helps us too!

Mindfulness and meditation are practices that benefit everyone, however, they can be especially helpful for children with emotional dysregulation. There are training programs available for parents, as well as classes. Older children can also benefit from dialectal behavior therapy (DBT) which focuses on tolerance of distress and emotional self-regulation.

When all is said and done, the home environment is the most integral part of a child's ability to learn these important skills. Keep things calm, cool, and reflective, and they will be too.

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