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EMOTIONS / PARENTING SOLUTIONS

The Most Important Skill to Teach Children

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Today I'm talking about the skill I believe to be the (Dare I say it?) MOST important skill to teach children. To call it one skill, however, is a little misleading. It's really a set of skills-- a whole host of skills. At the center of those skills is the ability to control something-- a behavior, a thought, movement, or a feeling.

The Most Important Skill to Teach Children

Behavioral Control
executive function

EMOTIONAL CONTROL

SELF-

REGULATION

PHYSIOLOGICAL

Modulation

Attentional Control

Meet Ashley!



I am a developmental psychologist on quest to understand children's emotions, behavior, and how best to support their development! Let's nurture them and watch them thrive! Read More.

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Generally, this is called **self-regulation**. But I am also talking about executive function (control in the brain), emotion-regulation (control of feelings) as well as behavioral regulation (control of actions & movement).

Most of you have probably heard about the marshmallow test in which a researcher will ask a young child (usually between ages 3 and 5) if they would like one or two marshmallows which are placed on a plate in front of them. Then the researcher devises a reason to leave the room and the child is presented with a choice before the researcher leaves: they can eat one marshmallow now or wait until the researcher returns and then they can have two. This is technically called 'delay of gratification' or the ability to suppress an impulse (eat that lovely marshmallow) in order to meet another goal— listen to the authority figure of the researcher and wait.

Delay of gratification is only one self-regulation skill, albeit the most well-known one, and it has been linked to many outcomes— children who wait longer are more sociable, have better grades, and even better SAT scores years later. There are also brain differences between the children who were better at delaying and those who were not as good at waiting. Self-regulation is partially genetic— some children will naturally be better regulated than others, however, self-regulation is *very* teachable as well.

Here are FIVE key ways to nurture self-regulation in your children.

1. Use naturally occurring situations to teach *strategies* for self-regulation.

Waiting to open holiday presents, birthday presents, not sticking her fingers in her friend's birthday cake before it is served, or waiting for a special anticipated activity are all teachable moments for self-regulation.

- First, realize that these situations are truly challenging for younger children. Before the event or situation, explain they will have to wait and why waiting is important.
- During the waiting process, offer ways for your child to distract themselves and help them to wait. What studies about self-regulation have shown is that **it isn't about the child having the sheer willpower to wait, but instead having lots of strategies to distract themselves while they wait.** Do something else, sing a song, tell a story etc.
- Recognize it if they struggle, "Sometimes it feels hard to wait. When you are waiting you can do something else." When I tell my son he has to wait for a special treat, he will say- "But can I just look at it, can I just touch it?" I say, "Let's take a quick look and then let's do something else, it is harder to wait when you are looking at it." In doing that, I acknowledge his desire and offer a strategy to help him regulate.

2. Realize it is just as important to *let go* of control.

One of my favorite quotes from researchers who study self-regulation is this:

"The human goal is to be as undercontrolled as possible and overcontrolled as necessary"— *Block & Kremen (1996)*.

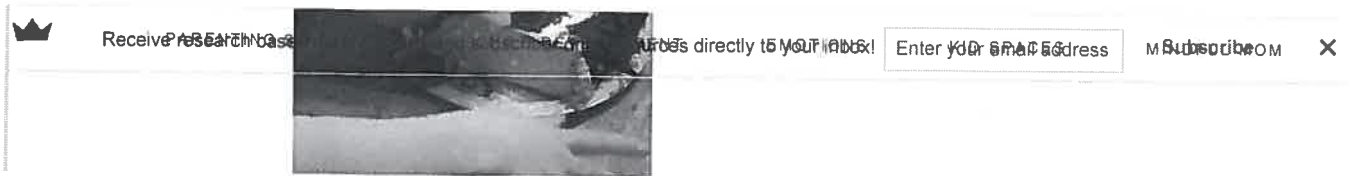
As parents, we spend ALOT of time trying to teach our children to control impulses. It is easy to forget that it is just as important to let them be "undercontrolled" for lack of a better term.

I loved it when I would return to the room as a researcher in those delay of gratification studies and the kids would stuff both marshmallows in their mouth as happy as could be, no restraint at all. They waited until I came back and then they reveled in the fact of being able to enjoy those marshmallows.

In other cases, kids would seemingly do a good job waiting, but when I came back in the room they were overcontrolled and anxious. Those kids could hardly enjoy the marshmallow. So, it isn't just about waiting or controlling, it's about being flexible in that control — able to control impulses when needed and letting loose when we can. If you notice your kids being pretty controlled and tending towards anxiety make it your mission to help them learn that sometimes it is okay to let loose.

Teaching your children when to let go of control is equally important as teaching them when to be in control. One of my favorite family traditions is that on your birthday you wake up to everyone in the family singing, presents and a sweet treat. Why on your birthday should you have to wait all day for presents and cake?





3. Remember self-regulation skills develop over years.

Generally speaking, the organization of the brain system that underlies self-regulation occurs around the age of three. This system goes through a period of rapid development until about the age of five. After the age of five, the development brain areas associated with self-regulation slows down until puberty when a second brain growth spurt means a whole new level of regulation skills will need to be organized and learned in adolescence.

So, all those teachable moments will add up over the years. There may be times when you feel like you don't see any progress — it develops slowly and gradually. It is one of those things where you'll see effects much later.

Right now, I see my role as simply noticing when my son struggles and helping him through it.

For example, I love that my son has such determination— but he also gets incredibly frustrated. He will be trying to connect trucks together with Lego pieces and when it doesn't work he screams and gets upset, but he WILL NOT give up. I want him to retain that feeling of determination, but he also has to learn to manage his frustration (don't we all?).

I try different strategies (Three quick Tips to Help Kids Calm Down) to get him to take a little break, sometimes I'll even offer a snack, and then we will go back to his project. Often, he can either accomplish what he wanted to do or he will come up with an alternative. That way, I hopefully preserved that wonderful tendency for determination and helped him manage frustration. When he is older, he will be able to manage that frustration on his own, well, until he is a teenager, but let me get through threenager first! And that's one reason behind the threenager/teenager comparison. Both, on different levels, are struggling with self-regulation.

4. Have your child make a choice and a plan.

Cognitively a well-regulated older child would be able to look through a set of options and make a reasoned decision. Or, faced with a wide array of possibilities, that child could make a plan. When it comes to well-regulated *thought* our goal for our children is that they can organize their thoughts and work through problems in a logical way. Cognitively they would be able to sort through the chaos, so to speak, and inhibit distractions in the meantime.

How do we foster this when they are young? I had a professor once who said, "No child is ever too young to make a choice, carrots or peas? Which one do they spit out the least?" Providing your child with plenty of opportunities for making choices — do you want to walk to the playground or play in the backyard? Will you have milk or water? Which pair of tennis shoes will you wear today? Gives them the practice they need to develop decision-making skills.

At younger ages remember to give a choice between two options and as they grow, increase the options. Also, give your child the opportunity to make a plan. This morning we are staying home we can do any of these things- what would you like to do first, second and third? My Aunt took her preteen and teenage sons to New York City once for vacation and she told me each son got a day to plan. They planned what they would do and she gave them a subway map so they could plan the route as well. I think this is a great activity for older kids. It is the same idea with younger kids as well— to plan and map out an activity is a great exercise in cognitive regulation.

5. Play control games.

Any game that asks kids to control something is fostering self-regulation. Anytime they have to suppress something. Like a whisper game, slow down speed up, the freeze game/dance, Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes, Simon Says, Red Light Green Light, and similar. See my post on more of our favorite games for self-regulation here for 3 to 5-year-olds and for 5 to 7 year-olds here. Also, make believe play has been shown to be linked to self-regulation. And just plain old free play. Yep, they are naturally equipped to learn self-regulation just through unstructured free play, we are along for nudges and helping through the struggles, but giving time and space for play may be the best thing we can do.

What are other moments you have noticed yourself teaching self-regulation? Do you find yourself needing to teach your child more regulation or needing to teach them to let loose more? Let's discuss in the comments!

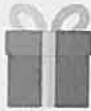
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HOW TO HELP KIDS DEVELOP SELF-REGULATION



1. Use naturally occurring situations to teach strategies for self-regulation.

2. Realize it is just as important to let go of control.



"The human goal is to be as undercontrolled as possible and overcontrolled as necessary" -- Block & Kremen (1996).

3. Remember self-regulation skills develop over years.

Self-regulation centers in the brain begin to organize around age 3 and continue to develop through age 5. However, there is continued growth throughout childhood and a second big growth spurt in Adolescence. Maturation of self-regulation centers occurs in the early 20s.



4. Have children make a choice and a plan.

5. Play control games.



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By ASHLEY SODERLUND PH.D.

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30 GAMES AND ACTIVITIES FOR SELF-REGULATION

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FEBRUARY 10, 2017 BY CLAIRE HEFFRON — 7 COMMENTS

How can you support the development of **self-regulation** in your child? Check out some of our best activities and ideas here!

30 Games & Activities to Teach Self-Regulation



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What is Self-Regulation?

When we talk about self-regulation in kids, we're referring to the ability to maintain an arousal level that is appropriate for any given situation. Self-regulation also involves having the ability to generate appropriate behavioral and sensory responses to the input in the environment and the ability to demonstrate self control: to monitor and control behavior, attention, motor output, emotions, and social interactions.

Self-regulation examples might include a child maintaining his composure and problem-solving or asking for help when another child takes his toy or being able to recognize that he should keep his voice quiet in the library. Self regulation in the classroom or school might include a child being able to attend and stay at his desk while the teacher is talking or being able to stay with his class and walk in line in the hallway.

It sounds like a lot, doesn't it? That's because self-regulation is extremely complex. It involves cognition, the sensory systems, behavior...and so much more! Many children struggle with one or more of these areas, making self-regulation challenging.

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25 Games & Activities for Self-Regulation

1) Simon Says

2) Freeze Dance

3) Musical Chairs

4) Red Light, Green Light

5) The Floor is Lava

6) The Floor is Sticky

7) The Floor is Booby Trapped

8) The Floor is Hot

9) The Floor is Cold

10) The Floor is Bumpy

11) The Floor is Silly

12) The Floor is Loud

13) The Floor is Quiet

14) The Floor is Fast

15) The Floor is Slow

16) The Floor is High

17) The Floor is Low

18) The Floor is Wide

19) The Floor is Narrow

20) The Floor is Long

21) The Floor is Short

22) The Floor is Tall

23) The Floor is Small

24) The Floor is Big

25) The Floor is Tiny



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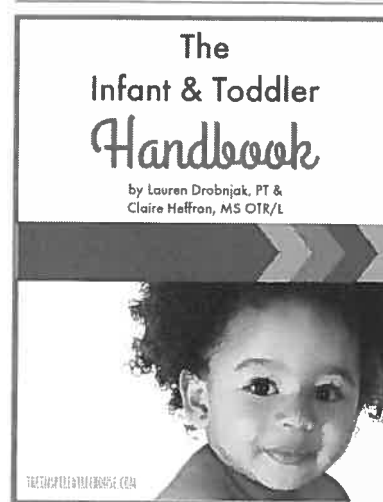
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How Can You Tell if Your Child is Struggling With Self-Regulation?

Kids who are having difficulty with self-regulation may:

- Act overly silly or "out of control"
- Have tantrums or meltdowns
- Struggle with transitions between activities
- Have difficulty waiting or taking turns
- Struggle with being in close proximity to others (e.g. circle time)
- Demonstrate problems during social interactions (e.g. talking too loud, standing too close, touching others)
- Have difficulty walking or waiting in line
- Move too quickly or with too much force
- Grab or touch objects impulsively

BOOKS AND OTHER PRODUCTS!



*Click above to watch our video about self-regulation. And share with a friend!



How to Help Kids Develop Self-Regulation

Even though self-regulation can be a challenging skill for many children, research has shown that games and fun activities can be effective in promoting the ability to self-regulate for children who are struggling.

THE INSPIRED TREEHOUSE RSS FEED

Games that support planning and problem solving, memory, attention, motor control, and sequencing can help kids develop the ability to self-regulate despite challenging situations and circumstances. Calming techniques, self-awareness exercises, and mindfulness activities can also be effective in supporting the development of self-regulation.

The following 30 games and activities can be great ways to introduce self regulation strategies with kids!

- Calming Techniques and Transition Strategies for Kids
- Alternative Seating for the Classroom
- Free Printable Pack: Hallway Games for Waiting!

Disclosure Statement



30 Games & Activities to Teach



Games and Activities for Self-Regulation

1 || Red Light, Green Light

2 || Simon says

3 || Partner Obstacle Course

4 || Duck Duck Goose

5 || Freeze tag

6 || Partner painting

7 || Hide and seek

8 || Wacky Relay

9 || Freeze dance

10 || Musical Chairs

11 || Mirror Mirror



👑 12 || **Parachute play**

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13 || "Counting down" or anticipation activities (e.g. setting out a beanbag chair and helping the child wait by counting down – "3...2...1...JUMP!" and then jumping onto the bean bag chair. And then repeating the activity so the child knows to wait before jumping)

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14 || **Hand clapping games**

15 || **Hedbanz**



16 || **Dancing** – practice dancing fast and slow to different types of music

17 || **Suspend**

18 || **Balloon volleyball**

19 || **Jenga**

20 || **Operation**

21 || **Simon**

22 || **Sequencing motor tasks** (e.g. do 3 jumps, then 2 hops, then stand on one foot for 3 seconds)

23 || **Bop It**

24 || **Spot It**

25 || Breathing techniques

26 || **Guided meditation for kids**

27 || **Yoga**

28 || **Zones of Regulation**

29 || **Calming sensory strategies (school)**

30 || **Calming sensory activities (community outings)**

Self-Regulation Strategies

Below, you'll find some of our favorite self-regulation strategies to use at home, in therapy, or in the classroom. You'll find lots of practical ideas that you can put into practice right away depending on your setting.

1 || **These reset activities can help calm kids who are dealing with tantrums.**



2 || Try these great calming techniques and transition strategies between activities throughout the day.

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3 || Check out these 4 Surprising Ways to Support a Child's Self-Regulation.

4 || These calming sensory strategies for the classroom can be great ways to support kids at school.

5 || Kids often have difficulty with self-regulation and arousal level at bedtime and naptime. These sensory-friendly sleep tips are great for kids who have trouble sleeping.

6 || Try these calming games and activities for outings where kids have to wait or transition in public places.

Self-Regulation Programs

These two programs are commonly used to address self-regulation with kids in various settings. Both programs have printable/tangible tools and fun lessons to give kids the skills they need to help themselves stay regulated throughout the day.

1 || Zones of Regulation

2 || The Alert Program

Books About Self-Regulation

1 || Self-Reg by Stuart Shanker

2 || Self-Regulation in the Classroom: Helping Students Learn How to Learn by Richard M. Cash Ed.D

Other Resources About Self-Regulation

1 || Developing Young Children's Self-Regulation Through Everyday Experiences, National Association for the Education of Young Children. Ida Rose Florez

2 || Self-Regulation Excerpt from Child Development Principles and Perspectives, by J.L. Cook, G. Cook, 2009 edition, p. 352-355.

3 || Self-Regulation: A Cornerstone of Early Childhood Development. Linda Groves Gillespie and Nancy L. Seibel. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

4 || Executive Function & Self-Regulation. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

5 || Discover the sense of interoception, a lesser known sensory system that can have a big impact on self-regulation.

What are your favorite games and activities for supporting regulation in kids? Share them in the comments below!

-CLAIRE



Want to learn more about the sensory systems and how sensory processing difficulties may be contributing to behavior and self-regulation problems in kids? Check out our book, [Sensory Processing 101!](#)

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Blog Latest Posts



Claire Heffron

Claire Heffron is co-author at The Inspired Treehouse and a pediatric occupational therapist in a preschool/primary school setting. She began her career with a bachelor's degree in magazine journalism but quickly changed course to pursue graduate studies in occupational therapy. She has been practicing therapy for 10 years in public and specialized preschool/primary school settings. She is a mom to three funny, noisy boys and relies on yoga, good food, and time outside to bring her back to center.

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Comments

Allie says

March 12, 2017 at 5:38 pm

What a great resource! Would Taboo be an activity to help self-regulating? Kids would have to refrain from saying the first things that come to their mind.

Reply

inspiredtree says

March 15, 2017 at 11:57 am

Hi Allie!

Love this idea! Taboo is a great game – and yes, a great challenge for kids to have to look at and remember the words that they're not allowed to say! Thanks for this addition to our list!

Reply



Connie



(/parents/adventures-in-learning/)

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Games That Teach Self-Regulation

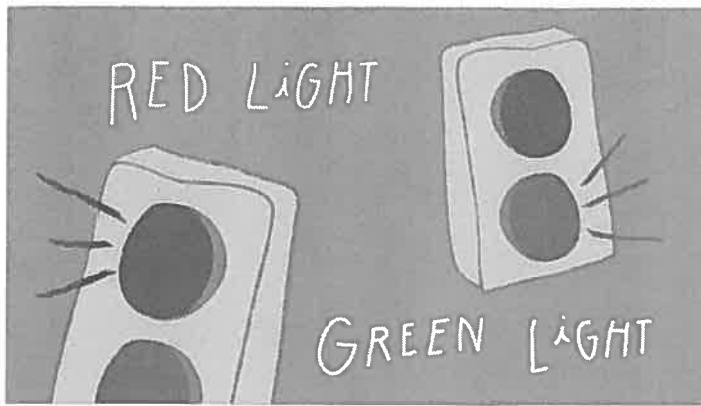
Social (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/category/social/>)

Self-regulation is the ability to control ourselves—it covers not only our actions, but our emotions too. In theory, the stronger our self-regulation, the more likely we're able to act in our own best interests. And that's a good thing, right? We'll exercise more, eat better foods, go to sleep on time and won't completely melt down when things don't go our way.

When it comes to our kids, experts believe that kids who master self-regulation become masters of their learning, are more critical thinkers, and make healthier choices; and the benefits are life-long.

As a parent, you've no doubt observed that little kids have next-to-none of this magical thing called self-regulation (hello tantrums!) and older kids have a limited reserve of it (I can only handle so much before I explode!). While it is something that develops as we mature, should we leave the ability to self-regulate up to nature alone, or is there something we could do at home to help kids develop or strengthen this important skill? Some exciting research (<http://oregonstate.edu/ua/ncs/archives/2014/nov/self-regulation-intervention-boosts-school-readiness-risk-children-study-shows>) says self-regulation is something kids can learn. And the best part? It can be taught through play. Here's how:

Red Light, Green Light



Most of us have played Red Light Green Light at some point. But if not, click on over to Zoom (<http://pbskids.org/zoom/activities/games/redlightgreenlight.html>) where Essence of New York, NY shares a quick recap of how it's played. Now here's the twist from Parenting Science (<http://www.parentingscience.com/teaching-self-control.html>) that can help kids learn about self-regulation:

After you play a few rounds of the game the traditional way, switch things up. Have the kids run when you say "red light" and stop when you say "green light". How does this simple switch help kids learn self-regulation? Now the old rules of the game have become habits to break! The kids have to actively think about and practice breaking a habit. While on the surface, it may look easy, it's actually some pretty serious stuff.

Mother May I? and Freeze Dance



Go ahead and try this out with a variety of games like *Mother May I?* and the *Freeze Dance*. Oh, and be sure to hand the reins over to the kids after they get the hang of it. Another way to encourage self-regulation: allow for independence. You get a moment to catch your breath and the kids enjoy feeling like they're in control. It's a win-win!

More Adventures In Learning

- Self-Esteem Portraits (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2015/08/self-esteem-self-portraits/>)
- Help Kids Express Themselves with an Emotion Journal (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2014/01/emotion-journal/>)
- Feelings Charades (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2013/10/feelings-charades/>)
- Calming Breathing Exercises for Kids (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2015/09/calming-breathing-exercise-for-kids/>)

About Jennifer Cooper (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/author/jennifercooper/>)

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Jennifer Cooper is the blogger behind Classic-Play.com (<http://www.classic-play.com/>), an online resource for creative families. Her favorite past times include: dancing around her living room, watching the Pink Panther with her kids and daydreaming. She lives in Baltimore, MD with her husband, photographer Dave Cooper, and two children.

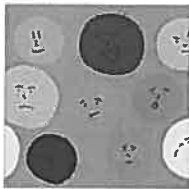
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Calming Breathing Exercise for Kids

PBS Parents

(<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2015/09/calming-breathing-exercise-for-kids/>)



Make a Feelings Faces Chart

PBS Parents

(<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2016/01/make-feelings-faces-chart/>)



Racing Activity with Straws & Pom Poms

PBS Parents

(<http://www.pbs.org/parents/adventures-in-learning/2014/01/racing-activity-straws-pom-poms/>)



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