

# Self Regulation

**What is self regulation?**



Self-regulation is a person's ability to adjust and control their energy level, emotions, behaviours and attention. *Appropriate* self regulation suggests that this adjustment and control is conducted in ways that are socially acceptable.

Self-regulation development occurs in the following manner:

- 12-18 months is when children become aware of social demands and develop the ability to change their behaviour when a parent asks. In most cases, this early step in self-control requires an adult to be nearby and directing behaviour.
- By 2 years of age, this ability improves to the point where children start to develop self-control, or the ability to follow others behaviour guidelines more often even when mum and dad aren't around.
- Then by 3 years old, most children can generalise self regulation strategies used from previous experiences. In other words, children will

act in ways that reflect how they think mum or dad would *want* them to act in different situations.

The processes involved in self-regulation can be divided into three broad areas: sensory regulation, emotional regulation and cognitive regulation.

- **Sensory Regulation:** Allows children to maintain an appropriate level of alertness in order to respond appropriately across environments to the sensory stimuli present.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Allows children to respond to social rules with a range of emotions through initiating, inhibiting, or modulating their behavior in a given situation to ensure social acceptance.
- **Cognitive Regulation:** Allows children to use cognitive (mental) processes necessary for problem solving and related abilities in order to demonstrate attention and persistence to tasks.

## Why is self regulation important?

Self-regulation skills are linked to how well children manage many tasks during early childhood. With these skills, children are more able to manage difficult and stressful events that occur as part of life, such as the loss of a pet, death of a family member or family separation. This helps to decrease the ongoing impact of stress that can contribute to mental health difficulties.

As a child learns to self-regulate, skills such as concentrating, sharing and taking turns also develop. This enables a child to move from depending on others to beginning to manage by themselves. Most children at some stage will struggle to manage their feelings and behaviours, particularly when they are tired, hungry or facing new experiences. When this happens, they might become upset, sulky or angry. This is all part of being a young child and is not necessarily cause for concern. If however this is problematic on a regular basis and there are seemingly little reasons for a child to be displaying such behaviours it is likely to be problematic in that it will impact upon academic performance.

## What are the building blocks necessary to develop self regulation?

- **Behaviour:** The actions of a person, usually in relation to their environment.
- **Sensory processing:** Accurate processing of sensory stimulation in the environment as well as in one's own body.
- **Emotional Development/regulation:** Involving the ability to perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions.
- **Attention and Concentration:** Sustained effort, doing activities without distraction and being able to hold that effort long enough to get the task done.
- **Executive Function:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills (e.g. what would mum *want* me to do in this situation?).
- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task or activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.
- **Receptive Language:** Comprehension of spoken language.
- **Social skills:** Are determined by the ability to engage in reciprocal interaction with others (either verbally or non-verbally), to compromise with others, and be able to recognize and follow social norms.
- **Working memory:** The ability to temporarily retain and manipulate information involved in language comprehension, reasoning, and learning new information.

## How can you tell if my child has problems with self regulation?

If a child has difficulties with self regulation they might:

- Be under-reactive to certain sensations (e.g. not noticing name being called, being touched, high pain threshold).
- Appear lethargic/disinterested; appearing to mostly be in their 'own world'.
- Have difficulty regulating their own behavioural and emotional responses; increased tantrums, emotional reactive, need for control, impulsive

behaviours, easily frustrated or overly compliant.

- Have tantrums that last for longer than typical
- The number of tantrums or behavioural episodes per day is more than typical
- Is difficult to discipline
- Typical behavioural strategies are ineffective.
- Is easily distracted, shows poor attention and concentration.
- Has poor sleep patterns.
- Loves movement. Seeks out intense pressure (e.g. constant spinning, running around, jumping, crashing in objects/people).
- Has delayed communication and social skills, is hard to engage in two-way interactions.
- Prefers to play on their own or has difficulty in knowing how to play with other children.
- Has difficulty accepting changes in routine or transitioning between tasks.
- Has difficulty engaging with peers and sustaining friendships.

## **What other problems can occur when a child has self regulation difficulties?**

When a child has self regulation difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- Heightened reactivity to sound, touch or movement.
- Being under-reactive to certain sensations (e.g. not noticing name being called, being touched, high pain threshold).
- Appearing lethargic/disinterested; appearing to mostly be in their 'own world'.
- Being easily distracted, showing poor attention and concentration.
- Have poor motor skills; appearing clumsy, have immature coordination, balance and motor planning skills, and/or poor handwriting skills.
- Have poor sleep patterns
- Have restricted eating habits or be a picky eater.
- Become distressed during self-care tasks (e.g. hair-brushing, hair-washing, nail cutting, dressing, tying shoe laces, self-feeding).
- Love movement so they seeks out intense pressure (e.g. constant

- spinning, running around, jumping, crashing into objects/people). or
- Avoid movement such as avoiding movement based play equipment (e.g. swings, slides etc).
  - Appear floppy or have 'low muscle tone', tire easily and shows a slumped posture.
  - Perform tasks with too much force, have big movements, move too fast, write too light or too hard.
  - Have delayed communication and social skills, is hard to engage in two-way interactions.
  - Prefer to play on their own or have difficulty in knowing how to play with other children.
  - Have difficulty accepting changes in routine or transitioning between tasks.
  - Have difficulty engaging with peers and sustaining friendships.
  - Display risky behaviours in play.
  - Flits between play activities, instead of sticking with one long enough to actually engage in it.
  - Seem less 'mature' than other of the same age.
  - Being emotionally labile (showing rapidly fluctuating emotion levels in a short time).

## What can be done to improve self regulation?

- **Trialing Management strategies:** Trialing and refining the variety of management strategies as not all management strategies work with all children.
- **Sensory Processing:** Enhancing the child's efficient and appropriate response to sensory stimulation through therapeutic intervention.
- **Social stories:** Visually depicted stories which are used to teach children specific social skills that they may find confusing or difficult to understand. The goal of the story is to increase the child's understanding by describing in detail a specific situation and suggesting an appropriate social response.
- **Role playing:** As a means of addressing possible scenarios to teach appropriate ways to act and interact.
- **Improve language and communication** to improve the ability to

cognitively regulate better.

- **Alert (Engine) program** to promote self-regulation through sensory and cognitive strategies.
- **M.O.R.E program** implementation using motor components, oral organization, respiratory demands, and eye contact to assist with sensory regulation.
- **The Wilbarger Protocol** (Deep Pressure Proprioceptive Technique sometimes known as the “Brushing” program) is a therapy program designed to reduce sensory or tactile defensiveness and assist with sensory regulation.

## What activities can help improve self regulation?

- **Sensory diet** to provide sensory feedback to the body which enables better sensory regulation. These activities might include:
  - Wheelbarrow walking
  - Animal walks
  - Trampolining
  - Cycling
  - Swings (forward and back, side to side, rotary)
  - Rough and tumble play / squishing or sandwiching with pillows or balls.
  - Wearing a heavy backpack
  - Weighted items (wheat bag on lap while sitting or heavy blanket for sleep).
  - Chewy toys
- **Discrete skills:** Activities that have a defined start and end point such as puzzles, construction tasks, mazes, and dot to dots.
- **Narrowly focused tasks:** Sorting, organising and categorising activities (e.g. card games such as Uno, Snap or Blink).
- **Visual schedules** enable a child to see and understand what is going to happen next. Schedules also help people to organise themselves and to plan ahead.
- **Timers** help with transitions as they tell the child how long and when they are going to have to do an activity. Timers also allow us to pre-warn the child when a favoured activity is coming to an end.

- **Talking/question counters for the over-talkers:** For small discrete periods of time where the child is engaged in an activity, provide a series (maybe 5) of talking or question counters. Each time the child talks or asks a question one counter is removed. When the child has no more counters, adults do not respond and the child learns to hold onto questions and when to ask them.

## **Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with self regulation in my child?**

Therapeutic intervention to help the child with self regulation is important to:

- Enable the child to reach their full potential.
- Assist with the child's ability to regulate for sleep.
- School transition may be difficult if they are unable to follow instructions within the educational setting (e.g. classroom instructions, academic task requirements).
- Ensure the child is well equipped to manage social situations where they need to play *with* peers.
- Allow the child to cope in busy environments.

## **If left untreated what can difficulties with self regulation lead to?**

When children have difficulties with self regulation difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- Anxiety and stress in a variety of situations leading to difficulty reaching their academic potential.
- Appropriate behaviour, contributing to extreme fatigue as they may have an inability to settle themselves to sleep.
- Challenges working in small groups/with others for play or group learning tasks.
- Making and keeping friends.
- Families of a child experiencing self regulation difficulties are also likely

to be negatively impacted through stress and the inability to participate in day-to-day activities due to their child's difficulty coping with change.

## **What type of therapy is recommended for self regulation?**

If your child has difficulties with self regulation, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

