

An Early Start to Self-Regulation Newsletter: Issue 3

In the first two newsletters we provided a background to self-regulation and insight into how to recognise core self-regulatory behaviours in young children. In the current newsletter, and those that will follow, we will discuss what parents, caregivers and educators can do to support children's self-regulation. This is not an exhaustive list. Visit our website (www.prsist.com.au) for more information and ideas. You can also be creative and come up with your own activities and routines that build upon these principles. If you come up with some good ones that work well for you, we would love to hear about them so we can continue giving interested parents fresh new ideas!

There are some key ingredients to successful self-regulation. First is goal-setting. A child has to decide to act in a particular way (e.g., to share a toy). Second is the motivation to remain self-regulated despite contrary urges, impulses and distractions (e.g., continue the sharing behaviour even though it now involves their *favourite* toy). Third, problem-solving strategies help your child cope when things get especially difficult (e.g., negotiating turns with the other child, finding a way to play together, being able to temporarily redirect their attention to another enjoyable activity until it is their turn). Last is the capacity to self-regulate. Even when your child does the first three successfully, sometimes they just lack sufficient capacity to remain self-regulated (e.g., snatching their toy away from another child, while looking at you knowing that they should not have done this). There are also a number of factors that make self-regulation even more difficult (for children and adults): when we are tired, stressed, sad, hungry, lonely, ill or feeling socially disconnected.

Any one of the above can lead to a child giving in to their natural impulses and reactions, even when these are inconsistent with their goals, their situation or the rules. Below we will talk about how self-regulatory capacity can be fostered and supported. The other ingredients will follow in subsequent newsletters.

How can we foster children's capacity for self-regulation?

Like our energy levels over the day, our ability to self-regulate can be limited and depleted. Because of their more-limited ability to exert control over their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours, young children especially struggle with this. A child may know that they shouldn't be doing what they are doing, but just lack the capacity to stop. A child may draw on the walls, all the while saying 'no, no, no' aloud. Like a muscle, our self-regulation can build with challenge and practice, and minimising factors that undermine self-regulation.



First let's discuss the conditions that allow our self-regulation to function at full strength. We know that we find it harder to self-regulate when we are tired, stressed, sad, hungry, lonely, ill or feeling socially disconnected. Think about a tiring and stressful day and how hard you had to work (successfully or unsuccessfully) not to be short with your family. The same happens with children except they have even less self-regulatory 'strength' to work with. Children are at their self-regulatory best when they are in situations in which they are rested, happy, safe, healthy, and where they feel loved, respected and connected. These situations also provide more fertile ground in which to foster children's self-regulatory capacity.

There are hundreds of possible activities that adults can do to build children's self-regulatory capacity. Critical to these activities is that you

introduce an appropriate level of challenge and, as your child improves, stretch their capacity by making it a little more challenging. In our PRSIST program we have selected 28 of our favourite activities, along with ways to alter or increase challenge. Below we provide a sample activity from each area of self-regulation.

Behavioural Self-Regulation Activity: Holding Fast

What to do: Prior to meal time, tell your child that you would like everyone to hold off eating until everyone has their food, so you can all thank whoever cooked.

Too easy? How to increase challenge: You can emphasise how enticing the food is by having your child sniff their food, talk about which part they are most excited to eat, etc. The process of description and careful observation is an important component of scientific thinking. *Even harder?* You can also have your child wait to get up from the table (e.g., before they carry out an assigned duty), as this is often even more difficult. In all cases, stress the importance of waiting and congratulate your child on how well they are doing.

** For more behavioural self-regulation activities, see our website or children's book Polly Wants a Lolly. The children's book links activities to the story, setting up some follow-up self-regulation activities. Your child's pre-school service has a copy of this book, and more information about it is available on our website.*

Cognitive Self-Regulation Activity: Market Mix-Up

What to do: In this activity, lay out a number of grocery shop items (or play versions of food items) on a table, next to a non-transparent bag. Beside you, obscured from view, have an identical bag with some food items already in it. Have your child choose three items that they want to purchase from the shop to make breakfast/lunch/dinner. To enrich the experience, you can ask them about what and how they will cook with those items. Once the items are in the bag, place your child's bag beside the pre-filled bag and tell them there has been a mix-up. You aren't sure which bag is theirs? To ensure you give them the right bag, have your child tell you one or more of the items they purchased.

Too easy? How to increase challenge: Have your child select and then recall an increasing number of items, and/or have them recall the items in the shopping bag in: (a) the order they first chose them; or (b) the order they would use them in their cooking.

** For more cognitive self-regulation activities, see our website or children's book I Don't Miss the Shopping List. The children's book links activities to the story, setting up some follow-up self-regulation activities. Your child's pre-school service has a copy of this book, and more information about it is available on our website.*

Social and Emotional Self-Regulation Activity: Song/Story Box

What to do: Write the titles of your child's favourite songs and books on index cards and put these into a bag or box. Like a lucky dip, ask your child to select an index card from the bag/box. This may not be your child's preferred choice at that moment, permitting discussion of how to manage disappointment. This might include discussions about fairness, the need for flexibility, and that we don't always get to do the things we want to do (although sometimes we do).

** For more social and emotional self-regulation activities, see our website or children's book The Pear that Wasn't There. The children's book links activities to the story, setting up some follow-up self-regulation activities. Your child's pre-school service has a copy of this book, and more information about it is available on our website.*