

An Early Start to Self-Regulation Newsletter: Issue 4

In the previous newsletter we introduced the idea that there are some key ingredients to successful self-regulation: (1) goal setting (a child has to decide to act in a particular way); (2) motivation (to remain self-regulated despite contrary urges, impulses and distractions); (3) problem solving strategies (to help the child cope when being self-regulated is particularly challenging); and (4) capacity (to self-regulate). In the last newsletter we wrote about capacity, and what parents, caregivers and educators can do to challenge and extend children's self-regulation. In this newsletter we focus on goal setting.

How can we encourage children to set goals?

An integral component of self-regulation is the ability to set goals; without them there would be nothing driving you to initiate and follow through with a behaviour. For instance, to start eating healthy you must first decide to change your eating habits. One important way you can support your child to set goals is by affording them genuine opportunities to lead and make choices. This may include getting them to help decide what you will have for dinner, where they would like to go on a family outing, or what order tasks will be completed in.

To make choices and lead effectively, children must develop the ability to be **planful and reflect** on past choices, interactions or behaviours. You can promote this sort of thinking with **open-ended questions** (e.g., Looking in the refrigerator, you could ask: 'What is something we could cook for dinner? What ingredients do we need?') or encouraging them to physically document their plans (e.g., write out the plan for what they're about to cook together; draw the sequence of events for their day). Once plans have been made it is important that you encourage your child to follow through with and reflect on plans, including discussing reasons for plans changing (e.g., 'I notice that you didn't draw a dog after all. Why did you decide to draw something else?')

In helping children make choices and set goals, it is important you **consider the age and ability of your child**. For younger children and those who have difficulty self-regulating, choosing from a large number of options can be overwhelming and hinder decision-making. In these instances, restricted choice (e.g., from three options) may be more appropriate. Also, if your child finds a task difficult you might create a role where they can monitor and take responsibility for the process. For example, they might be tasked with keeping track of the ingredients that have been added during baking (e.g., 'Have we added the flour? Have we added the eggs?'), with keeping time (e.g., 'We need to leave the park when the little hand on my watch gets to 9') or telling you where things need to go as you help them clean up.



As children set goals, make choices and take on leadership roles, they are required to control their thinking and behaviour, while also considering the needs and perspectives of others. It also supports children's emerging autonomy, assisting them to transition from being other-regulated (e.g., doing things only when directed to) to more self-regulated (e.g., doing things when they need to be done).