

An Early Start to Self-Regulation Newsletter: Issue 5

This newsletter continues to focus on the ways that parents, caregivers and educators can support children's self-regulation through everyday practices. In the previous newsletter we wrote about goal setting, and how adults can support children to make choices and achieve desired outcomes. This newsletter focuses on the importance of fostering children's motivation to be and remain self-regulated.

How can we encourage children to become and remain 'intrinsically' motivated?

A key factor influencing the ability to self-regulate is whether we are sufficiently motivated to become and remain self-regulated (e.g., deciding to eat healthier and then continuing to eat healthy, even after a challenging day). Motivation comes in two forms: one where the motivation comes from an internal desire (intrinsic motivation); and one that is controlled externally by others (extrinsic motivation). Children's learning and self-regulation depends on them being intrinsically motivated.

When children's motivation is lacking, adults often seek to encourage positive behaviours by using external rewards such as stickers, treats or praise. Research in this area indicates that when adults rely too heavily on praise, this undermines children's *intrinsic* motivation and the child's behaviour becomes increasingly reliant on these external rewards. In one particular study, children who loved drawing were told they would receive a certificate for their drawing. A few weeks later children who received a certificate ended up drawing less, now that they were no longer receiving certificates, than children who did not receive a certificate to begin with. Their behaviour had started to become reliant or motivated by an offer of reward. Children who are truly self-regulated are those who will engage in positive behaviours regardless of audience or reward (e.g., a child who doesn't talk over other children, even though they have something important to share).

How can we foster children's motivation to become and remain self-regulated? One way is providing encouragement around children's activities and actions by showing interest, asking questions and engaging in talk around what the child is doing or has done. It is important to note here the distinct difference between **praise** and **encouragement**. While both acknowledge children's behaviour, praise comes with a value judgement about the individual (e.g., 'You're a very good boy for packing away your toys', 'Wow, you're so clever – that's a high tower you have built'). Encouragement, on the other hand, involves children in the process and encourages self-evaluation (e.g., 'You look like you have put a lot of effort into building that train track. How did you make that so complex?') Try it. The next time someone tells you about something positive they did, try to communicate your appreciation for their actions without the use of praise (e.g., 'What did you put into that dish? It was really enjoyable' rather than 'You're an awesome cook').



One impactful way that adults can provide encouragement around children's activities and actions is by **demonstrating a genuine interest in their ideas, efforts and activities**. This can be done implicitly, such as playing alongside your child (e.g., while your child is doing a puzzle, you are doing your own puzzle alongside them) or becoming an active participant in their play (e.g., taking on a role, like being a visitor). While observing or interacting with children, you may also **acknowledge their ideas by making non-judgemental statements and describing what you see**. It is important to talk about what the children are doing rather than the children themselves. For example: Instead of saying 'That's a really great picture' when your child gets home from pre-school, you can say 'Ooh, tell me about this picture that you painted today in pre-school'. Avoid evaluating what they have done. Engaging children in conversation also supports language development.

You can further **engage your child through use of open-ended questions that encourage them to elaborate on their ideas and actions**. In doing this, it is important that questions are both genuine and relate directly to what your child is doing or has done. For example, 'Why did you choose that story?' Not only does this demonstrate your interest to your child but it also provides an opportunity to extend on their skill for reflecting on and self-evaluating their actions; abilities that are central to children's developing self-regulation.

We are not suggesting that praise should never be used. In fact, there are times where the use of praise may be appropriate or even valuable. For instance, if a child helps another child you might say 'Steven, thank you for helping your sister walk up the stairs' or 'I'm really proud of the way you behaved this afternoon'. It is the *overuse* of praise that can undermine children's intrinsic motivation.