

An Early Start to Self-Regulation Newsletter: Issue 2

In the last newsletter we discussed what self-regulation is, why it is important and how we can support its development. In this second newsletter we will discuss what early self-regulation looks like. While it might appear easy to identify successful self-regulation (e.g., sharing well) and unsuccessful self-regulation (e.g., snatching a toy from another child), understanding, responding to and supporting a child's self-regulatory development requires a bit more knowledge and structure. What are the core self-regulatory behaviours to look for? How do you identify a child's developmental progress in the areas of cognitive, behavioural, social and emotional self-regulation? How do we match experiences to a child's current abilities? Understanding a child's developmental progress is an important first step to being able to provide appropriate educational experiences. In this newsletter we discuss core self-regulatory behaviours and activities, and how experiences can then be tailored to your child.

What do core self-regulatory behaviours look like?

The research underpinning the PRSIST program suggests there are different areas in which self-regulation can be applied. Being strong in one does not necessarily mean you are strong across them all.

Cognitive self-regulation refers to the ability to control and sustain thinking and attention, and resist distraction. These are important abilities underlying learning as they support your child to focus on what is most important, while filtering out what is less important. Behaviours that are related to cognitive self-regulation include:

- Paying and maintaining attention
- Directing focus and resisting distraction
- Becoming and remaining engaged in activities
- Being thoughtful and planful before acting

Behavioural self-regulation refers to the ability to overcome behavioural urges and impulses that are not compatible with a child's goals, or the current rules or situation. This is important for a whole range of reasons. The ability to control impulses allows children to refrain from lashing out verbally or physically, taking things that aren't theirs or skipping someone else's turn. Behaviours that are related to behavioural self-regulation include:

- Being self-directed rather than directed by others
- Abiding by established rules
- Controlling their natural urges and impulses
- Being able to remain relatively still and seated, when needed
- Persisting with a task even when it becomes challenging

Social and emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to control our emotional reactions and social interactions. These abilities contribute to building positive relationships, dealing with the challenges and frustrations of life, as well as promoting emotional wellbeing. Behaviours that are related to social and emotional self-regulation include:

- Following established social conventions
- Being helpful, respectful and supportive



- Exerting control over emotional reactions, and being able to recover from being upset
- Willingness to take measured and appropriate risks (e.g., willing to try a new ‘tricky’ activity, where success is not guaranteed)

How do we know where are children are ‘up to’ in these self-regulation areas?

If the above are the sorts of important self-regulatory behaviours we are looking for, how do we elicit these behaviours to determine in which areas children excel and where opportunity for further development exists? It turns out that the key is to engage children in experiences that involve an appropriate level of challenge, to see how they respond. Do they give up easily or persist when things get tricky? Do they get easily frustrated?

There are two situations in particular that we have evaluated and use for these purposes in the Preschool Situational Self-Regulation Tools (PRISIST) Assessment. We describe one below, which is a memory game. The goal of the game is to try to find matching pairs among cards that have been placed face down. The number of pairs included in the memory game will depend on the age and ability of your child (e.g., 6 pairs for 3-year olds, 8 pairs for 4-year olds, 14 pairs for 5-year olds). The game proceeds as follows:

1. First ensure your child understands what a ‘pair’ is, then explain the rules of the game (e.g., they need to take turns, they can only flip over two cards per turn, if they get a pair they take another turn, if the two cards they turn over are not a pair then it is your turn).
2. Shuffle the cards and lay them on the table face down in rows. Use any cards you have handy – a deck of cards, number cards (if they can recognise numbers), animal cards from a grocery store promotion, or homemade cards drawn on pieces of paper.
3. Have your child go first by turning over two cards. Let them determine whether it is a pair. In fact, throughout the game try to let them be as self-directed as possible and only provide assistance when needed. For example: wait a short time to allow them to realise that it is their turn; allow them to consider their flips and see if they remember to turn the cards back over; see if they can remember and follow the rules of the game. Only provide assistance after your child has been given an opportunity to do this themselves.
4. On each turn, the player (you or your child) turns over any two cards (one at a time). If they successfully match a pair they get to keep the cards and gets another turn. On your turn, try to mix getting some wrong (about 75% of the time) and getting some right (about 25% of the time). This will give your child a chance to win, but also may introduce minor frustration if you get a pair they wanted.
5. When a player turns over two cards that do not match, those cards are turned face down again (in the same position) and it becomes the next player’s turn.
6. The player with the most pairs at the end of the game wins. The game should take around 10 minutes to complete.

Rather than just focusing on who gets the most pairs, instead pay close attention to the sorts of behaviours described above. A child with good *cognitive self-regulation* will: remain focused throughout the game (e.g., do they pay attention to their turn and yours?); resist distractions (e.g., do they look around the room during the game?); remain engaged (e.g., are they aware of whose turn it is and what is happening in the game?); and be thoughtful and planful before acting (e.g., do they consider which cards to select before flipping them or do they keep turning the same two cards over?) A child with good *behavioural self-regulation* will: engage in the game without prompting (e.g., do they take their turn without being constantly reminded?); control their behaviours (e.g., do they skip turns or break rules?); they stay in their seat and remain relatively still. A child with good *social and emotional self-regulation* will: be able to control their emotional reactions (e.g., do they have overly positive or negative emotions when they do or do not find a pair? can they cope with losing?); recover from emotional reactions quickly and without needing support (e.g., if they do get upset when they don’t get a pair, how long does it take them to get over it?); and be helpful (e.g., do they help to set up, pack up or assist in the game without asking?) Knowing how your child is doing in each of these areas will help you determine areas where they may need a little extra support.

In the next newsletter we will begin talking about the different things parents, caregivers and educators can do to support children’s self-regulation.

