

Harsh Discipline Does Not Enhance Self-Regulation

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by John Hoffman

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt your energy, emotions, thinking skills, social skills, and the ability to care about others according to the needs of a situation or problem.

When people first hear about the idea of self-regulation and how it can affect children's behaviour they sometimes ask, "What role does discipline play?"

Discipline is definitely part of the self-regulation picture, especially if we think of discipline in the truest sense of the word, as a teaching process. The efforts adults make to help children learn and understand the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour do contribute to self-regulation in children. However, discipline is not the most important part of self-regulation. And it's essential to understand that certain types of discipline—harsh discipline and punishment—do not contribute to self-regulation. In fact, they can interfere with it.

One of the challenges in parenting is that when discipline doesn't seem to be working—when children persist with the same misbehaviours over and over again, or do something "really bad"—parents often feel they have to "turn up the volume" by increasing the level of consequences or punishments.

This usually backfires. That's because, while harsh discipline does teach children something (mainly that it's important to not get caught doing bad things), it can actually interfere with their ability to learn to behave the way we want them to. That's because harsh discipline and punishment undermine self-regulation, which is the set of background skills that help children manage their behaviour.

Remember that self-regulation operates on a number of levels, including our ability to focus our thoughts, manage our feelings, and at the most basic level, manage our level of physiological arousal—how physically calm, agitated, excited, or energized our body feels in different situations.

Harsh punishment can cause fear, deep anger, resentment, or other negative emotions, which push children into a level of hyperarousal that is hard to recover from. In fact, strong emotions interfere with children's ability to absorb any lesson we might want them to learn.

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Punishment and harsh discipline also depend on the presence of an authority figure to enforce the rules. And what we want in the long run is for children to learn to manage their own behaviour—to develop self-discipline and to do the right thing, not out of fear of punishment, but because they know it's the right thing to do and they want to do the right thing.

Obviously, parents need to set limits, supervise children, and respond to misbehaviour. And, all children experience strong emotions at times—often when they are being disciplined in reasonable and fair ways. And, let's face it, most parents get very upset and overreact from time to time.

So the point is not that parents have to tiptoe around discipline issues and make sure they never upset their kids. The point is that the chronic use of harsh discipline causes hyperarousal, fear, resentment, and stress—all of which interfere with self-regulation in children. And self-regulation is what helps children listen to us, learn the rules we teach them, and exercise whatever level of self-control they have developed.

There is so much more to discipline than simply making and enforcing rules. And the aspects of discipline that are most often ignored by adults are those that have to do with supporting children's self-regulation.

Read the *Calm, Alert, and Learning* parent articles listed below to learn about the many positive things parents can do to support self-regulation in children.

- How Biological States Affect Children's Behaviour
- The Importance of Physical Activity in Biological Self-Regulation
- How Parenting Supports Biological Self-Regulation
- Helping Children to Manage Transitions
- The Link Between Emotions, Behaviour, and Learning