

Helping Children Understand Their Strengths and Weaknesses

(page 1 of 2)

by John Hoffman

Cognitive self-regulation refers to a variety of thinking skills that enable people to make full use of their brain power.

One key aspect of cognitive self-regulation is developing an understanding of one's cognitive strengths and weaknesses. No matter how smart children are or how well they do at school, all children need to learn how to make the best use of their strengths and how to compensate for weaknesses, and how to gradually improve in areas where their skills are weaker. For example, if a child has trouble organizing ideas and putting them in order, we can show him how to construct an outline; if she has trouble organizing her use of time, we can use a timer to assist her. If a child has great visual abilities, drawing a diagram can help him solve a math problem.

Obviously, young children's skills are still developing, so it takes time for their areas of strength and weakness to become apparent. Still, you might notice that your child seems to have more trouble than other children her age with printing, focusing attention, planning a sequence of actions to achieve a goal, or managing her time effectively.

The traditional tendency has been to assume that when children are weaker in a certain skill they just need to practise more or try harder. That's partly true, but sometimes you have to wait for their natural development to catch up before they can really master certain skills. Typically developing children of the same age can be at quite different levels of physical, social, and emotional development.

For example, a child who has trouble holding a pencil properly needs to keep using a pencil as required. But his fine motor skills can also be built through fun activities like drawing with crayons or markers, helping you to make stacks of coins for rolling, or little challenges like trying to pick up pieces of paper with a clothespin. In a year or two, when his finger and hand muscles are a little more developed, he'll probably find it much easier to hold a pencil.

Likewise, some children, because of their brain wiring, or perhaps because they are unusually interested in books and words, are ready to start reading at age 4, while others aren't ready until age 6 or 7. Older children still benefit from pre-literacy activities like having stories read to them, looking at books, singing songs or saying rhymes.

(page 2 of 2)

Regardless of their skill level, all children need to learn that skills can always be improved upon. Help them to understand that the improvement in their areas of weakness may not come quickly, but it can come. We need to make developing skills as much fun as possible, because it's the pleasure children experience trying to master a new skill that really drives learning.

When it comes to strengths, children need to learn to enjoy and use their strengths, and to understand that no matter how good you are at something you can always improve. It's natural to prefer the activities we do best, but watch that your child doesn't focus on his strengths so much that he ignores areas of weakness or new skills he could be learning.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can teach our children about strengths and weaknesses is that everybody has things they are good at and other things they are not so good at. It's important to point out too, that obvious skills like sports, music, or school are not the only important abilities or the measure of a worthy, capable person. Being a good friend, a kind and helpful person, or a hard worker are also valuable qualities that will serve children well in life, and they need to be reminded about them.