

# What Is Prosocial Regulation and Why Is It Important?

(page 1 of 2)

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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.

Research shows that self-regulation plays an important role in children's success in school, social relationships, and in life in general. The most sophisticated aspect of self-regulation is what some scientists call prosocial self-regulation. It is the set of abilities related to altruism, which includes

- The ability to understand and care about the feelings and problems of other people
- Knowing how and when to help others, and promote social acceptance and friendship
- The development of positive character traits such as honesty, integrity, empathy, and respect for others

We often think of these sorts of abilities and traits as part of children's character development—attributes we want children to develop in order to become good people who treat others well and make positive contributions to society. And that's true. Thinking about these skills in terms of prosocial self-regulation gives us another helpful way of looking at them. For one thing, it helps us to see that children's ability to think and behave in prosocial ways is built on the foundation of the other aspects of self-regulation. For example:

- A child needs to be able to manage and adapt her level of energy and physiological arousal in order to focus her attention on another person's mood, needs, or problems.
- A child must understand and (to some extent) control his own emotions in order to understand and respond appropriately to the emotions of others.
- A child must build thinking skills such as attention, memory, logic, and how to plan a series of steps to achieve a goal in order to think productively about other people's feelings and needs.
- A child needs to develop social skills such as interpreting peoples' tone of voice, facial expression, or reactions in order to understand another person's needs and determine how best to help or support them.

(page 2 of 2)

Young children exhibit these skills to a certain degree. Preschoolers can understand when their family members or friends are upset and may want and try to be supportive. A five-year-old may share a toy with an upset friend in an effort to be helpful. An eight-year-old who has seen news reports of people affected by hunger, war, or natural disasters may express concern for those people. Ten to 12-year-olds will often say supportive things to friends who are upset, or willingly participate in charitable giving or good works.

However, it takes all of childhood, adolescence, and even early adulthood to develop these skills fully. Even adults sometimes find it hard to put the interests of others ahead of their own. So we can't expect children to do it consistently. It also takes many years to build the knowledge and experience that allows us to develop a consistent and sophisticated understanding of other people's needs and how to help them.

What children need from parents is

- Support for the development of the foundational, biological, emotional, cognitive, and social self-regulation skills that are required for prosocial regulation
- To see their parents model prosocial behaviour and qualities such as empathy, honesty, respect, kindness, thoughtfulness, and helpfulness
- Experience in being helped by others and being helpful to others

**Don't expect too much too soon.** It's actually developmentally appropriate for young children to be self-centred much of the time. Thus it's hard for them—even stressful at times—to put others' interests ahead of their own. If your child often seems selfish and self-centred, that is perfectly normal. The capacity for prosocial, altruistic behaviour develops very gradually.