

What Is Self-Regulation?

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by John Hoffman

When we were in school, most people believed that school success came from a combination of how smart you were and how hard you worked.

That's still partly true, of course, but research shows that something more basic than intelligence and effort is even more important for school and life success.

It's called self-regulation.

Self-regulation is a group of abilities we develop gradually throughout childhood and adolescence, and even as adults:

- **The ability to adapt your level of energy and state of arousal to the demands of a situation and then recover from the effort:** for example, to make yourself concentrate on your homework, wait for your turn in a game, get out of the way of a speeding car, and relax so you can sleep.
- **The ability to understand and manage your emotions:** for example, to be able to calm down and recover when you are upset, express your feelings in words, manage fears and anxieties, and be joyful without getting over-excited.
- **The ability to pay attention and shift your attention as needed:** for example, to focus on what a teacher is saying, tune out distractions when working, and move from one activity to another when necessary.
- **The ability to understand and take part in various types of social interaction:** for example, to be able to participate smoothly in conversations, get along with peers and adults, meet and get to know new people, manage conflicts, and “read” other people's feelings and thoughts.
- **The ability to understand and care about the feelings and problems of other people:** for example, to be able to listen to upset friends and understand what they are feeling and why, and to know what sorts of things will help them feel better.

It's not hard to see why these skills are related to school success. If children don't know what it feels like to be calm and how to get that way, if they have trouble controlling their feelings and behaviour, or paying attention, if they cannot get along with others, then at times they will struggle with school (and life) no matter how smart they are or how hard they try.

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Parents play a big role in helping children develop the abilities related to self-regulation and you are most likely already doing many of the things that help.

Our job as parents is twofold: to “regulate” children at times, especially when they are young, and to help them build the skills that will enable them to regulate themselves.

Regulating children is not the same as controlling them. It’s how we help them manage their daily lives, for example, by comforting them and helping them calm down, by providing stable, child-friendly daily routines, and by guiding them as opposed to “making” them behave in certain ways.

Helping children build their ability to regulate themselves is mostly about getting them to understand what sorts of experiences or activities leave them drained or overwhelmed and what they can do to feel better when this happens. It’s about helping children to understand themselves and their place in the world. These are all things parents do every day.

Please keep in mind that self-regulation skills take years and years to develop fully and that there is a huge variation in “normal” self-regulation ability among children. Even an individual child’s ability to regulate his or her behaviour, attention, emotions, and social interactions will vary from day to day and situation to situation. The key here is not to get angry or irritated when a child is being overly impulsive or withdrawn or even aggressive, but to help him or her learn how to deal with the stressors that are leading to these behaviours.