

What Is Cognitive Self-Regulation and Why Is It Important?

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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.

Cognitive self-regulation refers to having good thinking skills and the

- ability to focus attention, ignore distractions, and switch one's focus of attention as needed
- ability to use memory, especially to keep several pieces of information in mind at the same time
- necessary logic skills, including an understanding of cause and effect and the ability plan a sequence of steps to achieve a goal, accomplish a task, or solve a problem
- understanding of individual learning strengths and weaknesses; knowing how to use the strengths to compensate for or improve upon weaknesses

In order to develop and master these types of skills, children must first have developed more basic self-regulation skills such as the ability to adapt their energy level and behaviour to the requirements of a situation, and to understand and control their feelings in a way that is appropriate for their age.

It's obvious that cognitive self-regulation skills are key to school success and research suggests that these skills may be even more important than a child's intelligence or knowledge. A child may know a lot of facts, but if he can't focus his attention on the teacher or tune out distractions when working, he may have a hard time completing schoolwork or learning what the teacher is trying to teach him. If he can't plan a sequence of steps to complete a project, he will have trouble with it no matter how much he knows about the subject.

Obviously, some of these skills are pretty sophisticated. They develop very gradually throughout childhood and adolescence, so we can't expect children to be able to use them at a high level very much of the time.

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Parents can help children develop cognitive skills, not only by helping with homework, but also through some of the activities that families do for fun. For example, traditional childhood games like puzzles, board games, and make-believe play exercise children's thinking skills. Board games require children to remember rules and focus their attention on the game play. Dramatic play requires children to stay in character and to plan a story line. Helping out with household chores, making cookies from a recipe, writing a shopping list or putting away groceries give children practice at planning a sequence of actions to achieve a goal and seeing the cause and effect of their actions.

But perhaps the most important point to remember is that when a child is struggling with homework or some other thinking task, it is sometimes helpful to think not about how hard the child is trying or what she should know, but whether she needs support with her ability to focus, tune out distractions, or plan the steps needed to accomplish the task.