



Self-regulation in children and teenagers

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage your behaviour and your reactions to feelings and things happening around you.

It includes being able to:

- regulate reactions to strong emotions like frustration, excitement, anger and embarrassment
- calm down after something exciting or upsetting
- focus on a task
- refocus attention on a new task
- control impulses
- behave in ways that help you get along with other people.

Why self-regulation is important

As your child grows, self-regulation helps them:

- learn at school – because self-regulation gives your child the ability to sit and listen in the classroom
- behave in socially acceptable ways – because self-regulation gives your child the ability to control impulses
- make friends – because self-regulation gives your child the ability to take turns in games and conversations, share toys, and express emotions in appropriate ways
- become more independent – because self-regulation gives your child the ability to make appropriate decisions about behaviour and learn how to behave in new situations with less guidance from you.

Helping children and teenagers learn and practise self-regulation

Here are practical ways you can help your child learn and practise self-regulation:

- Work on your child's skills for understanding and managing emotions.

- Use calming down strategies for toddlers, calming down steps for pre-schoolers and school-age children and calming down steps for pre-teens and teenagers.
- Plan for challenging situations where it might be hard for younger children to behave well. For example, 'The shop we're going to has a lot of things that can break. It's OK to look, but please don't touch'. Give your child a gentle reminder as you enter the shop. For example, 'Remember – just looking, OK?'
- Involve pre-teens and teenagers in problem-solving and negotiating difficult situations. For example, 'I'm working all weekend, so I know it'll be boring for you. Let's figure out how you can make the most of the time'.
- Praise your child when they show self-regulation and manage a tricky situation. For example, 'You were great at waiting for your turn', or 'I liked the way that you shared with Sam when he asked'.
- Try to model self-regulation for your child. For example, 'I'd better stop gardening now, so I can get you to soccer on time'. Or 'That was really tough to deal with, but I managed it'.

Problems with self-regulation

From time to time, different things can affect your child's ability to self-regulate.

For example, tiredness, illness, changes to your child's routine, and significant or traumatic events can affect your child's ability to regulate their reactions and behaviour. Also, some children have great self-regulation at child care, school or sport but find it hard at home. Other children struggle in busy, noisy places like shopping centres. And as children get older, self-regulation might be challenging if they have a lot of assessment tasks or relationship difficulties.

Although these problems with self-regulation are typical, it's a good idea to speak with a professional if you're worried about your child's behaviour or you're having trouble with your child's behaviour as they get older. For example, you could talk to your GP, your child and family health nurse, or your child's classroom teacher.