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Social and emotional skills: A guide for parents



WHY DO THESE SKILLS MATTER?

Children need to develop social-emotional skills that allow them to succeed in school, and in life.¹ These skills are important because research has shown that children who are mentally healthy, enjoy being with others, have developed friendships, and are confident in their abilities, will be more likely to develop positive attitudes about school, to be successful in adjusting to school, to participate actively throughout their education, enjoy and engage in learning and achieve academic success in the short and long term.² On the other hand, children who have delayed social-emotional skills, such as difficulty paying attention, following directions and getting along with others often face academic and behavioural difficulties at school.³ Some research has identified that the quality of parenting is the strongest modifiable risk factor to prevent these problems, so it is worth understanding the important role you play.⁴

Broad measures of social development include self-regulation, sociability, cooperation with others and prosocial behaviours.⁵ There has been particular attention recently on the traits of self-regulation and executive function. Executive function and self-regulation abilities also have lifelong importance for complete cognitive, emotional and social development.

So, what are self-regulation and executive function?

Self-regulation means a child's ability to regulate themselves without outside intervention or assistance. In the case of young children, this means that parents are not needing to remind them how to behave and instead, they have learnt to independently control their emotions and resist being impulsive in their behaviour.⁶

Executive functioning is a set of cognitive skills that include working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. We need these skills every day to learn, work, and cope in life.

Executive functioning and self-regulation abilities have consistently been determined by teachers as the most important when starting school, over and above cognitive skills and academic knowledge.⁷

Beginning school is a particularly important time that taxes young children's emotional and self-regulation skills.⁸ It is often within the classroom environment, in a group, with the demands of schoolwork that delays in the development of age-appropriate executive function skills are found. Teachers identify that some children may have difficulty with paying attention, managing emotions, completing tasks, and communicating wants and needs verbally, which impacts on their success at school.

¹ Jones, D. E., Greenberg, D., A., & Crowley, M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten and social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(11), 2283-2290.

² Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (2013, September). What does "school ready" really mean? Retrieved from <https://www.pacey.org.uk/Pacey/media/Website-files/school%20ready/School-Ready-Report.pdf>

³ Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

⁴ Sanders M. R., & Morawska, A. (2014). Can changing parental knowledge, dysfunctional expectations and attributions, and emotion regulation improve outcomes for children? (3rd ed). *Encyclopedia on early childhood development*. Retrieved from <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/parenting-skills/according-experts/can-changing-parental-knowledge-dysfunctional-expectations-and>

⁵ Melhuish, E. (2016, March). Global thoughts on early literacy. Presented at the Australian National Early Literacy Summit. Retrieved from <https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/Professor%20Edward%20Melhuish%20-%20Global%20thoughts%20on%20early%20literacy.pdf>

⁶ Pica, R. (2019). Fostering self-regulation in early childhood: What are we doing wrong? Retrieved from www.raepica.com/2019/07/self-regulation-in-early-childhood/

⁷ Graham, A. (2019, June 20). Here's what teachers look for when kids start school. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/heres-what-teachers-look-for-when-kids-start-school-116523>

⁸ Denham, S. A. (2006). Social-emotional competence as support for school readiness: What is it and how do we assess it? *Early Education and Development*, 17(1), 57-89.



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WHAT DO SELF-REGULATION AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTION LOOK LIKE IN A YOUNG CHILD?

The concept of self-regulation involves a child's 'effortful control' of their behaviour and maintaining focus despite the presence of distractions. If your child has well developed self-regulation abilities, it might mean that he or she can:

- Be able to delay eating a treat;
- Be able to adapt to changing situations and rules, at school or home;
- Think before doing something;
- Control their display of anger or need to cry;
- Take turns in a game;
- Filter out distractions while focusing on a task.

Some of the indicators of executive functioning include concentration, sequencing and memory, planning; problem solving; delayed gratification and impulse control.¹ Executive function abilities can include:

- Remembering things, like steps in solving a mathematical problem;
- Following two or three step instructions;
- Making plans;
- Focusing on multiple streams of information;
- Making decisions using available information, and revising when necessary;
- Resisting urges when they are not appropriate.

These competencies are often developed over time, and improve as a child grows up. If a child is struggling with their self-regulation and executive function, they might show signs of:

- Aggression and disobedience;
- Social withdrawal;
- Inattention and impulsive behaviours;
- Difficulty redirecting and transitioning between activities;
- Overreactions;
- Low tolerance for frustration;
- Becoming upset easily;
- Pessimistic and down on themselves;
- Lacks hope for the future;
- Difficulty setting, and carrying out, plans.

¹ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011, February). Building the brain's "air traffic control" System: How early experiences shape the development of executive function: Working Paper No. 11. Retrieved from <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN IN THESE AREAS?

A key period in the development of self-regulation and executive function capabilities is between the ages of 3 and 5, so the positive support of parents is essential. Yet, many parents have difficulty in teaching these skills because they are hard to teach and require a lot of attention and practice. Some of the following tips might help:

- ✓ Maintain social connections. Children should have plenty of opportunities to play with their friends, so they can practice the skills they need to learn.
- ✓ Play games that allow your child to practice taking turns, losing without becoming upset and following instructions.
- ✓ Be a good role model. Parents can model self-regulation, by keeping calm when dealing with mistakes.
- ✓ Teach self-awareness. It is important to find times to talk with your child about their feelings so they learn to be aware of how they are feeling and respond appropriately.
- ✓ Some research has also found mindfulness for children can help them learn greater self-control.¹

¹ Wheeler, S. (2014, April 28). Can mindfulness help kids learn self-control? *Greater Good Magazine*. Retrieved from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/mindfulness_help_kids_learn_self_control