



Teaching Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to change without distress, and to handle frustration without an outburst.

Self-regulation is the basis of all success in learning and life. It involves the ability to:

- Identify emotions and express them calmly
- Control impulses
- Delay gratification

Developing the skill of self-regulation is a journey – children learn it gradually and through many sources and strategies. Self-control develops over the years, with some of the biggest challenges happening between the ages of three and ten.

How can you tell if the child is struggling with self-regulation?

Kids who are struggling with self-regulation may:

- Act overly silly or “out of control”
- Have tantrums or meltdowns
- Struggle with transitions between activities
- Have difficulty waiting or taking turns
- Feel uncomfortable sitting/standing close to others
- Talk too loud, touch others, act inappropriately in social interactions
- Grab or touch things impulsively
- Move too quickly or with too much force

How to help the child struggling with self-regulation

The key to teaching self-regulation skills is not to avoid situations that are difficult for kids to handle, but to coach them through until they can handle these challenges on their own.

It's helpful to first understand that behavior is communication. A child who is so overwhelmed that they are having an outburst is a distressed child. They don't have the skills to manage their feelings and express them in a more mature way. They may lack language, or impulse control, or problem-solving abilities.

How you react when a child who is having an outburst has an effect on whether they will continue to respond to distress in the same way, or learn better ways to handle feelings so they don't become overwhelming.

Important Principles in Responding to Outbursts

1. **Stay calm**. It's easy to feel out of control and find yourself yelling at the child having the tantrum, but when you shout you have less chance of reaching them, and you will only be making them more aggressive and defiant. Stay calm and in control of your own emotions. You can be a model for the child and teach them to do the same thing.
2. **Praise appropriate behavior**. When the child has calmed down, praise them for pulling themselves together. When they do try to express their feelings verbally and calmly or try to find a compromise with you, praise them for these efforts.
3. **Help them practice problem solving skills**. The time to help the child try out communicating their feelings and coming up with solutions to their conflicts is when the child is not so upset that they escalate into aggressive outbursts. You can ask the child how they feel, and how they think the problem could be solved before the child loses control.
4. **Avoid triggers**. The trigger is usually being asked to do something they don't like, or stop doing something they like. Avoid meltdowns using the following strategies:
 - Give time warnings ("we're leaving in 10 minutes")
 - Break tasks into one-step directions ("first, put on your shoes"). Wait until that task is completed before giving the next step.
 - Prepare the child for situations ("you will need to finish reading before you may play the game")
5. **Create an environment where self-control is consistently rewarded**. If experience has taught the child that adults don't keep their promises, they will have more difficulty with impulse control and delayed gratification. You will need to be consistent with your praise and rewards so the child knows they can count on them.
6. **Support children with timely reminders**. Some children have trouble remembering directions and are easily distracted. It is helpful to remind them of your expectations right before the task.

7. **Give children a break.** If you ask children to go from one unpleasant duty to the next, their self-control is likely to suffer. Giving children a break can help them re-charge.
8. **Be an emotion coach.** Adults react in different ways to a child's negative emotions:
 - Some are dismissive ((That's no reason to be sad."))
 - Some are disapproving ("Stop crying!")

But neither of these approaches teach children to regulate themselves and their emotions.

Instead, talk to them about their feelings, teach them to express their emotions in positive ways, and discuss ways to cope.

Games that help children practice self-control

Any time we ask kids to play by the rules, we are encouraging them to develop self-control. The following games, in particular, help children learn to stop and think before acting. Consistent practice with these games will actually help children build self-control. Be sure to incorporate them into recreation time for children of all ages.

- **Red light, Green light.** When a child hears the words "Green light!" they're supposed to move forward. When they hear "Red light!" they must freeze. If they don't follow directions, they are out of the game. The child who reaches the end goal first, wins.
- **The Freeze game.** Children dance when the music plays and freeze when it stops. Dance quickly for fast-tempo songs, slowly for slow-tempo songs. And then reverse the cues: Fast music = slow dancing. Slow music = fast dancing.
- **Color-matching freeze.** In this variant of the freeze game, children don't just stop dancing when the music stops. First, they find a colored mat and stand on it. Then, before they freeze, they perform a special dance step. There are several, differently-colored mats on the floor, and each color is linked with a different dance step.
- **Conducting an orchestra.** Children play pretend musical instruments whenever an adult waves their hand, increasing their tempo when the hand moves quickly and reducing their tempo when the hand slows down. Then the opposite rules apply (e.g., children play faster when the hand moves slowly).
- **Drum beats.** An adult tells children to respond to different drum cues with specific body movements. For example, children might hop when they hear a fast drum beat and crawl when they hear a slow drum beat. After a time, children are asked to reverse the cues.

Exercise – Applying Newly Learned Strategies

Think about a time when your child had a tantrum or meltdown.

1. Describe the situation.
2. What was the trigger? (What caused the child to become so upset?)
3. How did you handle the situation? What methods did you try?
4. Did your strategies work?
5. What else could you have tried?
6. What could you have done to help your child resolve the issue before they became so upset?
7. Make plans now for how you will react the next time your child begins to melt down.