

An Early Start to Self-Regulation Newsletter: Issue 1

Your child's centre is participating in a program of practices and activities to support young children's developing self-regulation. If you provided consent for your child to participate in the evaluation of this program, we will collect information about their self-regulation before and after the program to evaluate its impact. If you chose not to participate in the evaluation, your child will still get to engage in the activities but we will not collect information from or about them. The program will run over the course of the year. These monthly newsletters are designed to keep you informed about the types of self-regulation supports your child will be receiving – you may even want to try some of them at home. This month we will focus on providing a background to self-regulation – what it is and how we can support it. On the back is a quick and easy sample activity that is taken from our children's book, *I Don't Miss the Shopping List*, which we have provided a copy of to your child's centre.

About Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to our ability to control our thinking, behaviours, emotional reactions and social interactions to achieve our goals or react appropriately to the situation – even if it is difficult to do so. Even adults struggle with self-regulation: when we say we are full, but continue nibbling snacks; when we know we don't need another pair of shoes, but give in because they are on sale; when we should be doing something productive (e.g., chores), but watching TV is more enticing. The same applies to children, but because their skills are still developing they have an even harder time than we do.

Research has shown that our ability to self-regulate is important. By the end of the pre-school years a well self-regulated child can sustain their attention and resist distraction, resist temptation and delay gratification, wait their turn, consider the consequences of their actions, and persist with challenging activities. They can do this even despite often-contrary urges and impulses. They are also able to stop doing enjoyable things (e.g. playing) to engage in less-enjoyable but necessary things (e.g. tidying up their toys before lunch) when needed. As a consequence, children who are better able to self-regulate are more likely do well at school, experience more positive relationships, and avoid problematic lifestyle choices that can lead to negative adult outcomes (e.g., poorer health, less wealth, more anti-social behaviour).



So what can we do to support children's self-regulation development?

Children are not born with the ability to self-regulate; these skills develop slowly and over time, and are sensitive to influences and experiences both inside and outside the home. Research has shown that the pre-school and early primary years are a particularly significant time to learn and acquire the skills necessary for self-regulation. Yet much of the research that explores what can actually improve self-regulation has focused on costly and time-consuming options, like computerised "brain training".

In the PRSIST program we take that view that there are everyday things parents, caregivers and educators can do to provide experiences and opportunities for children to apply and develop their self-regulatory skills. Over the coming months, in each newsletter, we will discuss practices and activities we believe support the development of early self-regulation. We provide an activity on the reverse as an example of this approach.

MIND READER 3.

What to do: Tell the children that you want to play a mind-reading game: That you are thinking of a particular way to sort objects, and you want to see if the children can 'read your mind' to figure it out. Use up to 20 objects that can be sorted according to different categories (e.g., colour, size, shape). Tell the children:

I am thinking of a way you could put these things into groups, and I want to see if you can read my mind and put them into the groups I am thinking. For example, I could put the blue ones together and the red ones together. But I'm thinking of a different way to put them into groups. Can you guess what I am thinking, and put them into groups in a different way?

Let the child decide when they are finished sorting the objects. If a child has sorted correctly, tell them *That's right. Now I'm going to think of a different way.* If a child sorts incorrectly, tell them *That's a clever way to put them into*

groups, but that's not the way I was thinking of. Let's try a different way to see if you can work out what I am thinking.

If you are doing this in a group, have children take turns sorting the objects. In between attempts to sort, support children to think and talk about ways the objects are the same and different from each other (and thus can be sorted).

Too easy? How to increase challenge: Choose sorting rules that incorporate two dimensions at once (sort by colour and size: large red, small red, large green, small green). This will require some explanation, demonstration, and practice with the children.

Ideal location(s): Indoors or outdoors.

Ideal formation(s): Individual or small group (no more than three children).

What you need: A collection of objects that can be sorted by a number of different dimensions (e.g., colour, size, category, where it is normally located, its function, etc.) For example, these may be objects found in nature that can be sorted by colour, size, whether they are hard, whether they are found on the ground, whether they grow (stone, leaves of different types, stick, grass, pine cone, flower, etc.), blocks (of different colours, sizes, and shapes), or cards depicting digits and quantities (to be sorted as less or more than a specific number).

What it does: This activity challenges children's ability to direct and redirect their thinking. It also supports problem solving and emergent classification.

Real life application and implications: Our first attempts to solve a problem may not be effective. Instead, we have to think of alternative solutions, not being boxed in by our initial idea. This is one hallmark of creativity. Similarly, we often need to flexibly switch between tasks, disengaging (e.g., from play when it is time to pack up) and reengaging as necessary. This also happens when children need to disengage with a task to perform an alternate task (e.g., to go to the toilet), and then re-enter play. As with nearly everything, practice makes perfect. This activity gives children an opportunity to challenge and extend their ability to flexibly shift their thinking, as the task requires.



Note. One of the activities found in the children's book, *I Don't Miss the Shopping List*, which focuses on children's cognitive self-regulation. Two other books have also been developed to focus on behavioural self-regulation (*Polly and her Lolly*) and social-emotional self-regulation (*The Pear that Wasn't There*).