

SELF-REGULATION MATTERS

WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR CHILDREN TO SELF-REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOURS? PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS AND PARENTS DISCUSS.



Self-regulation involves taking a pause between a feeling and an action. It means not reacting instinctively, but thinking things through, considering the consequences and waiting patiently. Children who lack self-regulation skills are ruled by their immediate desires and find it difficult to control their impulses, resulting in teary tantrums and outbursts when they do not get their way.

Poor self-regulation skills can affect all areas of a child's life. A child who yells or hits other children out of frustration will find it hard to make and keep friends. A child who cannot focus in class may face learning challenges. These can snowball into larger issues such as rejection by peers, anxiety or low self-esteem, among others. It is important for children to acquire and develop self-regulation skills from a young age as stronger self-regulation has been shown to predict better performance in school and beyond, better relationships with others, and fewer behavioural difficulties.

Beanstalk gets parents and teachers to weigh in on the self-regulation process, challenges and strategies.

TEACHERS, HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE SELF-REGULATION IN CHILDREN?

Zaidah Bte Salleh: Self-regulation is the ability of children to manage their emotions, reactions and behaviours when faced with demanding situations. It is a set of skills that involves development in the physiological, behavioural, emotional and cognitive domains in children.

Amirah Binte Ab Hamid: Self-regulation is the ability of a child to express emotions such as anger or frustration in positive ways.

WHAT DOES SELF-REGULATION LOOK LIKE?

Zaidah: Children who can self-regulate are able to take turns and share toys, which helps them make friends. Self-regulation also helps children cope with strong feelings and manage stress, as they learn to calm down after getting upset.

“Being able to self-regulate helps children feel secure as they are able to respond and learn in a calm manner.”

MDM ZAIDAH BTE SALLEH, 57
Principal, Ichiban Nurtureland Kindergarten



Amirah: Children who are able to regulate their behaviour may sit quietly in a corner when feeling upset, instead of venting their frustration at people and things around them. When approached by a teacher, they are able to keep calm and explain their behaviour. But it takes time to develop these skills. It is a process.

PARENTS, WHAT ARE SOME TRIGGERS THAT CAUSE YOUR CHILDREN TO ACT UP? WHAT IS YOUR USUAL RESPONSE?

Shanti Govindasamy: My son Vishwaa acts up at home when he doesn't get water-play time. I have learnt to deal with his outbursts by staying calm and saying in a firm voice, "No, that wasn't nice." I give him time to cry it out and then give him a comforting hug. I also ensure that he apologises. My intention is to let him know that his actions are wrong, but despite everything, I am still there for him.

Chiang Jiann Ter: My son Cae Ven gets frustrated when he repeatedly fails in a task like stacking blocks. There are times when children need that emotional outburst to understand their emotions. On my part, I am there for my son when he needs me, to pacify him and help him accomplish his tasks.

TEACHERS, WHY DO CHILDREN FIND IT DIFFICULT TO REGULATE THEIR BEHAVIOURS AND EMOTIONS?

Zaidah: Young children are still learning how to adjust and adapt to routines, schedules, expectations and changes in their environment. Disruption to routines and schedules, fatigue or tiredness may cause them to react without thinking. As they get older and their brains develop, they will be better able to manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviours.

Amirah: Adults may feel that the easiest way to coax children out of a meltdown is to offer them whatever they want. This is not desirable as children then conclude that they can get their way when they throw a tantrum. Also, a child regularly exposed to an environment where physical or harsh verbal exchanges are the norm will emulate such behaviour.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO LEARN HOW TO SELF-REGULATE FROM A YOUNG AGE? WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Zaidah: It is important to start managing emotions and behaviours from a young age as children will encounter tough situations and need to learn how to cope with strong feelings. When children are able to self-regulate, they learn better in school. When children can't manage their emotions, they may be too afraid to try anything or get angry when they make mistakes, thus affecting their learning. Being able to self-regulate helps children feel secure as they are able to respond and learn in a calm manner.

Amirah: When children learn to self-regulate, they are able to recognise acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. This life skill will help them cope with future challenges and facilitate their interactions with others. It will be more difficult to undo a set behaviour if it is not addressed at a young age.

WHY AND HOW ARE TEACHER OBSERVATIONS IMPORTANT IN ASSESSING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOURS?

Zaidah: Children may behave differently in preschool and at home. At home, parents may indulge children in their wants and needs. In preschool, however, children need to follow rules and share attention and toys with peers. It is crucial that the teacher



ENTERING FORMAL SCHOOLING

The ability to self-regulate is positively linked to children's academic and socio-emotional outcomes upon their transition from kindergarten to primary school. This is because children with good self-regulation skills are better able to stay focused during lessons, interact well with teachers and classmates, and problem-solve on their own. In her ongoing study on this relationship, Dr Ng Ee Lynn, a Research Scientist at the National Institute of Education, is interested in two aspects of self-regulation: **executive functioning** (children's ability to engage in goal-directed thought and action) and **effortful control** (how well children can use their attentional resources to suppress a behavioural or emotional response that is inappropriate within a given situation).

“Despite the challenges, I always encourage my son to cool down and focus on the solution.”

MR CHIANG JIANN TER, 37
Finance Manager, father of Chiang Cae Ven, 4



MDM SHANTI GOVINDASAMY, 47
Teacher, mother of Vishwaa Maha, 6

observes the child's behaviour and takes note of any triggers. Teachers also play a role in identifying larger areas of concern. Some children may be the only child at home and their parents may not be able to discern if there are issues relating to behaviour and mood.

Amirah: Teachers can document the frequency of meltdowns and factors triggering the child's behaviour, and discuss it with their peers and centre principal. We can subsequently share these observations with the child's parents to come up with appropriate strategies to deal with the child's emotions.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU MODEL WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD MANAGE EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOURS?

Shanti: Children learn through observing others. As Vishwaa is a visual learner, it's important for me to show him positive behaviours. Even when I am stressed, I try to get my priorities right and exhibit the right behaviours.

Jiann Ter: I explain to my son why some adults behave the way they do when they are in a good or bad mood. Parents are human, too! Despite the challenges, I always encourage him to cool down and focus on the solution.

TEACHERS, WHAT ARE SOME DEVELOPMENTALLY-APPROPRIATE RULES AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THE DIFFERENT PRESCHOOL AGE GROUPS?

Zaidah: When children are three to four years old, they want to be involved in creating rules, so set simple and clear boundaries. This is the stage where they will make mistakes and may not always follow the rules. Children aged five to six are developing reasoning skills and are able to understand and discuss the purpose of having rules and routines. Be supportive as children problem-solve and learn for themselves.

Amirah: Children aged three to four may need more pictorial cues when it comes to understanding rules. Older children can discuss with the teacher and come to a consensus on acceptable behaviours to be observed in the classroom. To foster a strong home-school partnership, teachers can share articles or behaviour management techniques with parents.

WHAT ARE SOME TRIED-AND-TESTED STRATEGIES TO REGULATE BEHAVIOURS?

Zaidah: Have a routine and set clear boundaries — when children can anticipate what is going to happen, they are able to stay calm. Asking children to take deep breaths and exhale can also help. Use a composed and steady tone when a child is overly excited. Offer lots of praise when the child shows good emotional control.

Amirah: Use dramatisation to create scenarios of meltdowns and encourage children to find solutions. Encourage them to express their feelings through drawings — these often provide teachers with clues to the source of the emotional upheaval.

HOW CAN PARENTS AND PRESCHOOL TEACHERS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Jiann Ter: Teachers and parents should use similar methods so that children are not confused or reluctant to try a new method of managing their emotions and behaviours.

Shanti: Vishwaa's teachers and I discuss his growth and share what has worked with him. The support from his preschool has helped greatly in Vishwaa's social-emotional development. The strong home-school communication has helped me grow as a parent as well.

MODEL BEHAVIOUR

Mrs Dianne Swee-Seet, ECDA Fellow and Principal of The Ascension Kindergarten, explains how co-regulation between adult and child supports the latter's ability to respond to stress positively.



Children observe how you manage your own challenges and emotions. An adult's body language and tone send non-verbal signals to a child. By modelling positive behaviours, parents, caregivers and teachers play an integral role in helping children form a healthy blueprint on emotional regulation.

BIRTH TO THREE YEARS

The AGILE approach by Gerard Costa, PhD, advises parents to pay attention to:

- **AFFECT.** How do your tone and expression convey your emotions?
- **GESTURE.** Your body movements, posturing and pacing are felt by your child during interactions.
- **INTONATION.** The tone of your voice is "understood" by children long before words.
- **LATENCY.** Pause awhile and give your child time to take in your gestures and intonations. Co-regulation requires patience.
- **ENGAGEMENT.** Before you continue, make sure you have engaged your child. Your baby's facial expressions and body language will tell you if he is engaged.

FOUR- TO SIX-YEAR-OLDS

Children in this age group like to be empowered. Co-regulation involves equipping children with coping skills and letting them select which strategy to use when they feel sad, angry or worried. Make a coping skills wheel and come up with different strategies together with the children to manage their emotions. These could include taking a break, counting to 10, breathing in and out, or reading a book. For a start, it is important to acknowledge the child's emotions. Practise saying "I am sad because..." with him. Then refer to the wheel and ask the child which strategy he would choose to cope with those feelings. You can then acknowledge his response by saying, "I see that when you are sad, you know what to do." By co-regulating, it helps the child to practise and sustain appropriate responses.

“Teachers can document the frequency of meltdowns and factors triggering the child's behaviour, which could be shared with his parents.”

MS AMIRAH BINTE AB HAMID, 29
Senior Teacher,
Playscapes @ 4PM



SELF-REGULATION IN PRACTICE

DR SYLVIA CHOO, DR LILY LAU AND MS BIBIANA TAN FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT, KK WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, EXPLORE HOW SELF-REGULATION CAN DRIVE SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOURS.

IN LIGHT OF COVID-19, DOES SELF-REGULATION AND BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS TAKE ON GREATER SIGNIFICANCE?

Dr Sylvia Choo: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes to almost every family. Children, too, have had to adapt to new routines and learn new social behaviours in a short period of time. Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage emotions and behaviours in response to situations. Children with stronger self-regulation skills are likely to cope better with these changes. Parents and caregivers can help children to develop skills and manage situations that the children cannot yet handle on their own.

HOW CAN PARENTS AND EDUCATORS USE THE PANDEMIC AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH SELF-REGULATION AND BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT IN CHILDREN?

Dr Lily Lau and Ms Bibiana Tan: Parents and educators can teach children new behaviours, such as keeping a safe distance from one another, and to self-regulate using these strategies:

> Teach-Model-Practise-Praise

- **TEACH** the what, how and why of the new behaviour and its impact on others, via stories.
- **MODEL** desirable and undesirable examples of new behaviour.
- **PRACTISE** desirable behaviour.
- **PRAISE** desirable behaviour whenever it is exhibited.

> Talk about emotions and appropriate ways to respond

Talk about feelings with children. Validate their feelings and help

them find appropriate ways to respond, such as positive self-talk or taking a break. Help them practise these responses regularly. When children react negatively, it is important to validate their feelings. For example, say "You are upset because..." and then prompt them to take a break before their emotions get too strong.

> Model new behaviour and self-regulation

Model the new behaviour and let children know about it. For example, when you are lining up on the MRT platform, you can say, "I am going to stand behind the yellow line so that I keep a safe distance from the moving train." Model self-regulation by naming your emotion and response explicitly.

For example, when you are frustrated, you can say, "I am getting frustrated now and I am going to do some exercise."



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