

BUILDING BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL

It's a Skill!

by Katherine Schneider

Preschool-aged children are just beginning to explore and develop their ability to manage emotions and behavior. This developmental milestone, known as self-regulation, is a vital skill that can be nurtured through consistent guidance and practice. Self-regulation involves managing emotional reactions, calming oneself when upset, adapting to changing circumstances, and handling frustration effectively. As children become more proficient in self-regulation, they gain greater self-awareness, preparing them for future collaboration and helping them consider different perspectives.

Before children can learn to self-regulate, they first need co-regulation. Co-regulation occurs when a trusted adult remains calm and provides emotional guidance while helping a child navigate their feelings. By staying attuned to the child, the adult fosters a sense of safety, allowing the child to process emotions and eventually return to a state of calm. This consistent support lays the groundwork for children to gradually manage their emotions independently.

It's essential for children to experience their emotions fully, learning that feelings are natural and temporary—they come and go. Teaching children that emotions are safe to experience is key to helping them build emotional resilience. In early childhood, when cognitive and emotional skills are still developing, co-regulation offers the structure children need to grow into emotionally resilient individuals.

Self-regulation is nurtured through observation, practice, and a supportive environment. Children learn by watching adult behavior, building self-awareness, adopting coping strategies, and practicing problem-solving. Consistent routines, familiar environments, and the presence of trusted adults all



play significant roles in a child's ability to develop and apply these self-regulation skills. A child's temperament, personality, and surroundings also influence how they acquire these abilities. Since there is a natural learning curve, each child progresses at their own pace, making patience and steady guidance essential for success.

It's important to remember that self-regulation, like any other skill—whether academic, physical, or social—requires regular practice. Parents and caregivers can provide a nurturing, consistent environment that supports a child's journey toward emotional independence. By encouraging positive coping strategies and modeling healthy emotional responses, you help lay the foundation for your child's emotional growth and long-term resilience.

Help Your Child Develop Self-Regulation with These Practices:

- **Model Self-Regulation:** Children learn by watching adults. Demonstrate how to manage emotions and respond calmly to challenges by verbalizing your actions, such as, "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to take a deep breath."
- **Teach Emotional Awareness:** Help children recognize and label their emotions by saying, "I see you're feeling angry" or "It looks like you're sad." Understanding their emotions is the first step in learning to manage them.
- **Offer Coping Tools:** Equip children with simple strategies like deep breathing, counting to slow down, engaging in physical movement to release energy, or using sensory items such as a stress ball or fidget toy. Encourage them to take a break and talk about how they feel.
- **Provide Choices:** Giving children choices, such as "Do



you want to play with blocks or read a book?” helps them feel in control, reducing frustration.

- **Encourage Problem-Solving:** Teach children to think through simple problems by asking, “What can we do to make this work better?”
- **Practice, Practice, Practice:** Self-regulation takes time and experience. Give children opportunities to practice these skills in real situations, offering guidance and support as needed.

On the Go? Try These Tips and Tricks:

- **Prepare in Advance:** Explain an upcoming situation in simple, clear terms. For example, if you’re going to a new place, describe what they might see, hear, and do. Reducing uncertainty helps children feel more secure.
- **Visit the Location:** If possible, visit the new location before the actual event. A practice run will help children prepare and manage their expectations.
- **Explain the Purpose:** Help your child understand why they’re entering a situation. For example, “We’re going to the doctor to make sure you’re healthy,” or “You’re going to a new school to learn fun new things and meet friends.” Knowing the purpose can help children orient and prepare.
- **Involve Them in Preparation:** Let your child prepare for an experience by packing their school bag or choosing their clothing. This sense of control makes them feel more involved and confident.
- **Smooth Transitions:** Unfamiliar situations often feel less stressful when transitions are smooth. Plan extra time to avoid feeling rushed. A calm, unhurried pace helps children feel more at ease.
- **Reflect After the Event:** Once the situation is over, talk

with your child about how it went. Ask how they felt and what helped them manage any discomfort. This reflection builds confidence for future experiences.

Set Your Child Up for Success

Being prepared is half the battle. Use this checklist to ensure your child is ready to face their day with emotional and physical stamina:

- **Is your child well-rested?**
A good night’s sleep helps children regulate their emotions and handle challenges more effectively.
- **Is your child well-nourished?**
Healthy meals and snacks can energize your child and stay in a good mood throughout the day.
- **Has your child’s routine been stable?**
Consistent routines create a sense of security and help your child feel more in control of their day.
- **Has there been a recent life event, such as a new baby or a move?**
Significant life changes can be exciting growth opportunities and help your child build resilience and adaptability. Significant changes can also feel overwhelming, so providing extra emotional support during these times can help your child manage stress.
- **Is your child encountering familiar situations or surroundings?**
Familiar environments help children feel secure, which makes self-regulation easier.
- **Does your child have access to familiar adult support?**
Trusting adults provide reassurance and guidance when emotions run high.