



## Learning to Be Your Best

Chelsea was having trouble paying attention to the teacher and wiggled in her chair. She was mesmerized by a yellow longtail sitting on a branch of a tree that she could see out of the window. Chelsea often spoke out of turn and barely allowed the other children an opportunity to talk. When it was time to clean up, Chelsea would put away some of her materials and then move on to play with a puzzle, leaving her work station messy. When her teacher asked Chelsea to finish cleaning up, she burst into tears and fell to the floor in frustration.

Chelsea's story will sound familiar to primary school teachers and many parents. So, what is the cause for Chelsea's misbehavior? One explanation is that she lacks the skill of self-regulation. Self-regulation can be defined as the ability to monitor and control your own behavior, emotions, or thoughts, and alter them in accordance with the demands of the situation. Young children don't always have the skills they need to manage their thoughts, impulses, and emotions in a way that is acceptable. No one, especially children, likes to feel like they are failing and nobody likes to be in trouble. Sensitive children are especially vulnerable to feeling ashamed and sad when these things occur. They act out because they do not know how to cope with these feelings.

As adults, we practice self-regulation as a fine art. We constantly observe the people and things in our external environment and we monitor our internal reactions. Most of us delay speaking or doing something until we have a sense of how others may respond. This sounds complicated but we do it quickly and instinctively. We simply act in our own best self-interest and resist losing control of our emotions or thoughtlessly offending others.

We begin learning self-regulation from the time we are infants. We try different behaviors until we find the ones that reliably deliver the best response. One of the challenges for young children is that they must quickly adapt their self-regulation skills to meet new expectations. A crying baby is picked up, changed, fed, and cuddled, but a crying two-year-old may be scolded or, worse, punished. It is difficult for them to understand new or changing expectations and how to act or react. The transition from playing at home all day to going to school is a steep learning curve.

We all use sophisticated self-regulation skills in order to manage emotions, concentrate on tasks, participate in groups, and follow directions. It takes years of practice to become good at politely and confidently asking for what you want, completing a task on time, and knowing how to act as new situations arise. "Taking turns" when playing a game or during a group activity is a tricky skill for young children to learn, and many adults have a hard time doing that, as well. Following directions pushes us to new heights of watching, listening, and quieting our inner anxieties long enough to carry out a series of steps, each step in the correct sequence.

Research shows that children who have begun to develop self-regulation skills are better prepared for school and have better social and academic outcomes than their peers who have either never developed the skill or struggle to master it. The important thing to remember is that developing good self-regulation is slow work for everyone and we all have strengths and weaknesses that impact our ability to do so.

### HOW DO CHILDREN LEARN SELF-REGULATION SKILLS?

Research also shows that self-regulation is a skill that can be practiced and improved. There are two key ways to help nurture self-regulation in your child: (1) model it yourself, in what you do, in what you say and when you say it, and in how you react to situations; and (2) support your child's development through engaging in skill-building activities and games.

Here are a few tips for helping your child develop, practice, and improve his or her self-regulation skill:

1. Make use of boring time: You can sing songs or play games with your child when standing in line at the grocery store, riding in the car, or waiting for the bus. Playing games helps children to become logical thinkers, which is key to developing self-regulation skills. Try I-Spy, search for certain color cars that pass by, find letters on signs or magazines in the order of the alphabet, or point out license plates. Games teach logical thinking in fun and appropriate ways while occupying their minds when they have to wait and be patient.

2. Engage in activities that require focus such as completing puzzles or reading books with your child. Your child will most likely find these things fun if you show an interest in them. Working together will also help your child to develop an ability to pay attention and take turns. It can be tempting to check your smartphone while spending time with your child, but try to refrain from doing this. It can be good to tell your child that you are tempted to do so, and that it is a struggle for you. This contributes to good communication with your child and models your own self-regulation skill.
3. Play games that require taking turns. Board games and active games like Hide and Seek require turn-taking. Games that have complex rules like Simon Says or Red Light, Green Light (1,2,3) help children to practice the self-regulation skills to wait, be patient, and take a turn.
4. Show how you model self-regulation throughout the day. For example, if you pick up sweets on your way home from work, rather than taking a bite in the car, say out loud, "I'm going to save this and wait to eat it after dinner because that's when we have dessert and I don't want to spoil my appetite." By sharing your private thoughts as verbal communication with your child, you can point out your own self-regulation abilities and explain how and why you make choices.

Take a second and think about how self-regulation skills relate to your own life. Are you able to resist distractions while at work? Can you control and inhibit the impulse to reach for that chocolate cake when you are trying to cut back on sweets? Just from these few examples, it is easy to see how regulating your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors is crucial for success in school, work, and life. Be patient with young learners and encourage other adults to join you in teaching but not punishing children so that they can learn, develop, and build upon their personal strengths.

If you would like more information on this topic you can contact Family Centre and ask to speak with the Community Support Worker at 232-1116.