Self-regulation is our ability to manage our feelings, thoughts and actions in ways that meet both our needs and the demands of our environment. Self-regulation helps children manage and modify their emotions and behaviour, focus and shift their attention, get along with peers and adults, plan and pursue goals, and eventually, to exhibit the qualities we think of as self-control and self-discipline.

As infants, we are regulated by our parents or other caring adults because we are helpless in meeting our own needs. But as we develop into young children, most of us learn—from others and through practice—how to pay attention, organize information and thoughts, deal with frustration or distractions, and perform other “executive functions” that help us learn new things, get along with others and reach our full potential.

Self-regulation in the classroom

Self-regulation is increasingly seen by educators as key to a student’s academic achievement and social success (unlike in the past when IQ was seen as the most important factor). This is because children who do not develop the capacity for self-regulation tend to have problems in their early school years. They may struggle with tantrums, impulsive behaviours, and sleep and diet issues. They may be hypersensitive to transitions, and may overreact to minor challenges or stressors. They may also be inattentive or physically hyperactive.

Poor self-regulation not only impedes a child’s ability to attend to her lessons but may also undermine the teacher-student relationship.1 Not surprisingly, teachers respond much more positively to children who are able to stay calmly focused. Those who have more difficulty in this regard often receive less attention or are treated less sympathetically.

Fortunately, the classroom setting itself can help to steady children with emotional or behavioural challenges. When provided with the structure and predictability they need, students learn how to better express and control their emotions and thoughts.

Fact

By age five or so, children are usually able to recognize what is upsetting them and express feelings with simple words such as “mad” or “sad.” By age eight or nine, children are able to describe their feelings in more detail, especially if they have been encouraged to be expressive and put feelings into words.

Promoting self-regulation through self-awareness and empathy

A big part of knowing who we are starts with being more aware of our feelings and the things that cause us stress or anxiety. Helping children develop emotional self-awareness is critical because it forms the basis of self-regulation.

Teachers can promote self-regulation by teaching their students how to recognize their emotions before they escalate. Students who can recognize, identify and talk about emotions are less likely to reach the point where they act out their strong emotions with disruptive behaviours. They are also better able to build healthy relationships with parents, peers and teachers.

Students who can empathize with others are better able to interpret others’ reactions to their emotions, helping them learn appropriate ways of expressing themselves.2 They also tend to be better at sharing with others, dealing with conflicts, and building and maintaining relationships.

Teachers can influence students’ understanding of themselves by discussing emotions during everyday interactions3 Building understanding of emotion-related words can happen by intentionally teaching children to label both negative and positive emotions, and by helping them understand the causes of emotion.
Some students may need help to learn to regulate their negative emotions. Children who act out aggressively need to find ways to calm down and to cope. Severe aggressive behaviours, if left unchecked, can lead to disturbed behaviour in adolescence and beyond.

Quick tips for promoting emotional awareness

- Try to see the world from your student’s point of view when he or she is struggling with an emotion.
- Encourage your students to talk about how they feel by listening without judgment or criticism and by helping them develop the vocabulary to express their feelings.
- When appropriate, share your own emotions with students.
- Keep in mind that students are learning about emotions by watching how you handle your feelings.

Fact

Children who are unable to recognize and express their feelings are more emotionally vulnerable and more susceptible to the influence of other peoples’ emotions. They can also become more resentful when emotions stay bottled up inside.

References


Activities for Classrooms Grades 1–3