

Self-Regulation

“Self-regulation” is how we adjust our *feelings, actions, attention, thoughts* and *bodies* so that we can handle different situations effectively without getting overwhelmed. We need to “regulate” ourselves to make sure we have enough energy, alertness or calmness to deal with everyday life. Staying awake, falling asleep, being patient or even stopping ourselves from doing something that hurts others, are all part of self-regulation. Self-regulation is a key building block in children’s development. And children learn it most often through their daily interactions with caring adults.

Over the course of our lives, we gradually build our abilities to “regulate” our bodies and the ways we respond to all kinds of people and situations. Children first learn to self-regulate by having caring adults help them when they need it. For example, when babies cry, adults soothe them until they calm down because babies can’t do it themselves. Children also learn how to self-regulate by *watching* adults regulate themselves during daily interactions. When adults do this in kind and nurturing ways, they are creating warm and trusting relationships that make it easier for children to learn ways to self-regulate.

As children grow older, they are able to do more regulating of their *bodies, feelings* and *actions* themselves. For instance, when children are being toilet-trained, they are learning to regulate their *bodies*. Learning to calm down is an example of *feeling* regulation and playing peacefully with others is an example of *behaviour* regulation. When children have been supported by caring adults, they gradually need less and less help to do these things.

Children also learn how to regulate their *attention*. Staying with a task instead of wandering around, or choosing to listen to a happy song when feeling sad are examples of this. Eventually, children learn to regulate their *thinking* about life situations. Looking for other reasons to explain why things happen or challenging negative thoughts about themselves or others are part of this. Learning to regulate attention and thinking are very important in solving problems and dealing with stressful situations.

As we become adults, much of our ability to self-regulate becomes automatic – we don’t even need to think about it. And that’s good. But sometimes self-regulation requires *conscious* self-control, especially when we face serious challenges and change. So, building our ability to self-regulate is life-long. Luckily, as we have shown, self-regulation can be learned.

To help us as we travel on the “Road of Life,” there are many ways we can learn to continue to build our self-regulation abilities and our children’s, too. For a brief introduction, visit the [Intro to Resilience](#) for a list of other inner strengths and some outside supports that work together to help develop self-regulation. And then, please check out the rest of this website for other ways to build your relationship with your child and help develop strengths that support self-regulation and resilience.