

Helping your child self-regulate (0-6 years)

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage your behaviour and your reactions to feelings and the things happening around you.

Self-regulation includes being able to:

- regulate reactions to emotions like frustration or excitement.
- calm down after something exciting or upsetting.
- focus on a task.
- refocus attention on a new task.
- control impulses.
- learn behaviour that helps you get along with other people.

Why is self-regulation important for your child?

As your child grows, self-regulation will help him:

- learn at school – for example, because self-regulation gives him the ability to sit still and listen in the classroom.
- behave in socially acceptable ways – for example, because self-regulation gives him the ability to control impulses.
- make friends – for example, because self-regulation gives him the ability to take turns, share toys and express emotions like joy and anger in appropriate ways.
- become more independent – because self-regulation gives him the ability to make good decisions about his behaviour and learn how to behave in new situations.
- manage stress – for example, because self-regulation helps him cope with strong feelings like anger and calm himself down afterwards.

Tips on what to expect

Babies can't control their own reactions and behaviour.

Your **toddler** will start to develop some basic self-regulation skills. For example, he will learn how long he usually needs to wait for things like food or a turn with a toy.

From around **two years** your child will probably be able to follow simple instructions like 'Please put your hat on' and 'Don't hit'. But he might break rules in tricky situations. For example, he might snatch a toy rather than waiting for his turn.

From around **3-4 years**, your child will probably be able to control his behaviour with some help from you. For example, he might try to speak in a soft voice if you're at the movies.

By **5-6 years** your child is likely to be better at imagining the consequences of his behaviour and deciding how to respond. Also, when he can imagine how somebody else feels, he's more likely to control how he expresses his own needs.

Self-regulation keeps developing right into adulthood.

Tips to help your child learn self-regulation

Here are some tips for helping your child learn self-regulation:

- Try to model self-regulation for your child – for example, show your child how to do a frustrating task without getting upset. You could say something like, 'Wow that was hard. I'm glad I didn't get angry because I might not have been able to do it'.
- Talk about emotions with your child – for example, 'Did you throw your toy because you were frustrated that it wasn't working? What else could you have done?'
- When your child struggles with a difficult feeling, encourage him to name the feeling and what caused it. Wait until the emotion has passed if that's easier.
- Have clear rules that help your child understand what behaviour you expect – for example, 'Use your words to show your feelings'.
- Talk with your child about the behaviour you expect – for example, 'The shop we're going to has lots of things that can break. It's OK to look, but please don't touch'. Give your child a gentle reminder as you enter the shop. For example, 'Remember – just looking, OK?'
- Praise your child when he shows self-control and follows the rules. For example, 'You were great at waiting for your turn', or 'I liked the way that you shared with Jun Jie when he asked'.

Problems with self-regulation

If your child has problems with self-regulation, you might see difficult behaviour like tantrums.

If your child has a tantrum, it is often best to wait it out. Stay close to your child so he knows you are there. But do not try to reason with him or distract him. It is too late once a tantrum has started.

It can also help to identify triggers for difficult behaviour. For example, if your child often has tantrums when you are shopping, it might help to go shopping after your child has had a nap and a snack.

Tantrums and other difficult behaviour can be stressful. It may help to accept that you cannot control your child's emotions or behaviour directly, you can only keep him safe and guide his behaviour. Developing and practising self-regulation skills is a life-long task.

Consider seeking professional help if:

- your child seems to have more tantrums or difficult behaviour than other children his age.
- your child is behaving in difficult or out-of-control ways more often as he gets older.
- your child's behaviour is a danger to himself or others.
- your child is difficult to discipline and your strategies for managing his behaviour do not seem to be working.
- your child is very withdrawn and has a lot of trouble interacting with others.
- your child does not seem to have as many communication and social skills compared with other children his age.



Recommended Reads by the National Library Board

Recommended Reads

- [Be quiet!](#)
- [The way I feel](#)
- [Monkey needs to listen](#)