Self-Regulation Snap Shot #2: A Focus on Preschool-Aged Children

Support of self-regulation is critical at each stage of development from birth through young adulthood.

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions.

Self-regulation develops through interaction with caregivers and the broader environment over an extended period from birth through young adulthood (and beyond).

Caregivers support self-regulation development by using three strategies in a process called "co-regulation." Caregivers include parents, teachers, afterschool care providers, extended family members, and others.

Self-regulation includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills and processes that support children in coping with strong feelings, controlling impulses, learning, and getting along with others.

Self-regulation is important because it promotes wellbeing across the lifespan, including physical, emotional, social and economic health and educational achievement.

This snap shot summarizes key concepts about self-regulation development and intervention for preschool-aged children for practitioners and educators interested in promoting self-regulation for this age group. It is based on a series of four reports on Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress prepared for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). For more information, visit: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports
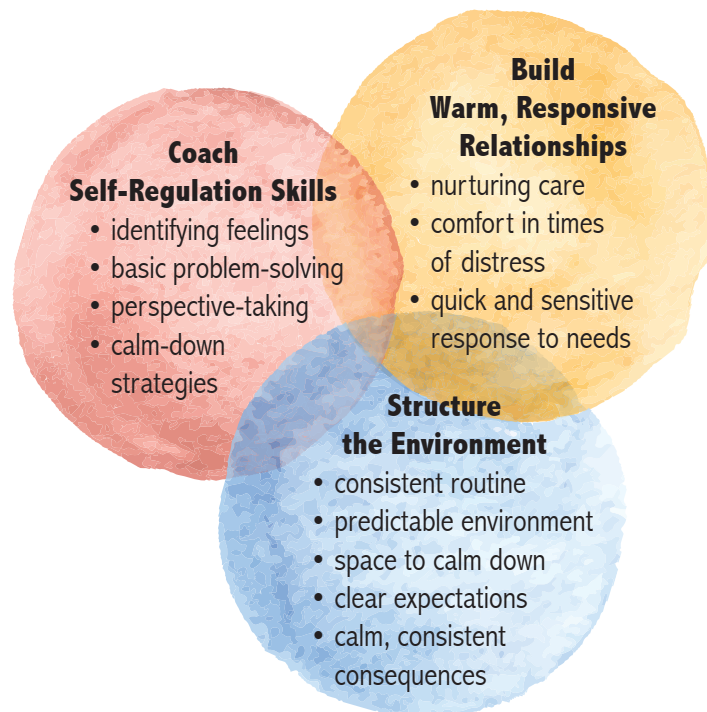
Self-Regulation Skills Developing in Preschool-Aged Children:

- Recognizing a broader range of feelings in self and others
- Identifying solutions to simple problems
- With support, using strategies like deep breaths and self-talk to calm down
- Focusing attention for longer periods
- Persisting on difficult tasks for increased lengths of time
- Perspective-taking and early empathy

Biology / Skills / Motivation (Internal & External) / Caregiver Support / Environmental Context

Self-regulation is influenced by stress and adversity in the environment as well as caregiving supports and children's own biology, skills, and motivation.


Coach Self-Regulation Skills
- identifying feelings
- basic problem-solving
- perspective-taking
- calm-down strategies

Build Warm, Responsive Relationships
- nurturing care
- comfort in times of distress
- quick and sensitive response to needs

Structure the Environment
- consistent routine
- predictable environment
- space to calm down
- clear expectations
- calm, consistent consequences

**Three components of co-regulation for preschool-aged children**

Lessons Learned About Interventions to Promote Self-Regulation in Preschool-Aged Children

Across the lifespan, there are two intervention approaches that support development of self-regulation: skills instruction and co-regulation support. The combination of these approaches is believed to be most effective, regardless of the child's age. For preschool-aged children, existing interventions utilize these approaches as follows:
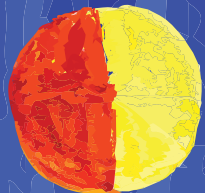

- 37% of studies focused on skills instruction alone;
- 27% focused on co-regulation alone;
- 32% combined both;
- 4% used other approaches
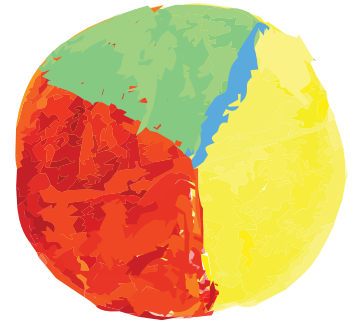
60% of the children lived in adversity or were at-risk
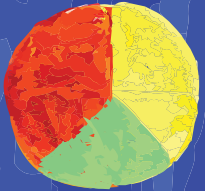
More than half of the children were minority (34% African-American, 25% Hispanic)

More than half of the interventions were implemented in schools

The majority of studies targeted children (79%); 56% targeted parents; 23% targeted teachers

Based on a review of preventive interventions published between 1989 and 2013, 75 studies with comparison groups were found that targeted self-regulation development for preschool-aged children (ages 3-4 years), with the characteristics described here.

Strengths:
- Large number of studies with diverse samples
- Variety of outcomes, particularly direct assessment of child skills
- Most are implemented universally in preschool classrooms

Limitations:
- Programs are often lengthy
- Parent and teacher interventions are under-utilized

Conclusions:
- Broad positive impact seen across many domains
- Substantial effects for parents and teachers suggest benefit for expanding focus on co-regulation involvement of parents and teachers

Outcome Assessed	# Findings	Average Effect Size*	% with Positive Effects*
Child Outcomes: Core Self-Regulation			
Cognitive	40	Small to Medium	78%
Emotional	30	Small to Medium	83%
Behavioral	84	Small to Medium	67%
Stress	17	Small	53%
Motivation/ Initiative	6	Small to Medium	67%
Child Outcomes: Other Functional Domains			
Language/Learning	31	Small to Medium	77%
Interpersonal	53	Small	66%
Mental Health	37	Small	65%
Parent Outcomes			
Parent Co-regulation	21	Medium	95%
Parenting Skills	37	Medium	95%
Parenting Attitudes	11	Medium	91%
Parent Mental Health	6	Small to Medium	67%
Teacher Outcomes			
Teacher Co-regulation	2	Small to Medium	50%
Classroom Climate	15	Medium to Large	87%

*Reported only if findings are based on at least two studies

Key considerations for promoting self-regulation in preschool-aged children:
- Deliver self-regulation skills instruction universally in preschool classrooms
- Train preschool staff in co-regulation skills
- Identify ways to support school and program staff's own self-regulation capacity
- Share self-regulation information, ideas, and classroom approaches with parents/caregivers to support their co-regulation and promote consistency across environments