

## Fostering Self Regulation Skills

Sasha, a family child care provider, is talking with some children in the sandbox when she hears a screech coming from Dylan, a very active and spirited toddler, who is playing near Aleia, another toddler with some trucks. He lifts the truck over his head and Sasha arrives just in time to gently put her hand over his and stop him from hitting Aleia. His face is streaked with tears as he points to the truck Aleia has in her hand and says, "Mine truck!" Sasha calmly says, "Were you trying to let Aleia know that you want that truck?" Dylan nods. "It can make you feel mad when someone doesn't understand, can't it? And Aleia, does it make you feel scared when someone yells and almost hits you?" Aleia nods. "Let's figure out how to



ask Aleia for a turn Dylan. You can say, 'Can I have that when you are done?' and if you need help to remember the words you can ask me or one of the bigger kids to help you." Aleia offers the truck to Dylan as Sasha says,

"Dylan, you didn't eat very much breakfast earlier, do you think you might be hungry? Snack is in five minutes, so let's be sure you eat some snack."

### Why is it important for children to develop self-regulation?

Self-regulation is necessary in order to navigate the social world successfully. Throughout early childhood, if given appropriate strategies and support, children can gradually develop the ability to regulate their bodies, emotions, and attention. It is essential for children to build skills in self-regulation in order to be successful in school as the capacity to learn depends upon the ability to manage one's body, emotions, and attention.

### What is self-regulation?

- Self-regulation involves learning to maintain control over body, emotions, and attention.
- During infancy, this is really a process of co-regulation, which eventually builds toward more independent self-regulation as caregivers support the child's gradual mastery of control.
- It is within relationships with caregivers that children are first learning about how and why to regulate themselves and seeing models for regulation. The caregiving relationship is bi-directional and both caregiver and child have temperamental traits that may or may not easily be a good fit in the relationship, so caregivers should be aware when a child's actions, words, or behavior might be a challenge to their own ability to regulate.
- The individual child's physical needs, growth patterns, temperament, prior experiences, and feelings of security, combined with the caregiving environment, affect the child's capacity to be soothed and their mastery of self-regulation. When children feel secure in their relationship with their caregiver they are better able to develop self-regulation skills.
- When a child is in a situation that is highly challenging to their physical, emotional, or attention regulation, their ability to think and learn will be challenged, so it is important to provide an appropriate level of support that meets the individual child's needs.

***"Regulation in early development is deeply embedded in the child's relations with others."***  
(Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p.94)

## Infant/Toddler Co-Regulation Tasks:

**Physiological Regulation**—The caregiver is aware of the child's cues related to sensory input and responds by limiting or organizing sensory input in the environment. The caregiver works with the child to establish routines around eating and sleeping.

*Example:* If the child provides a cue such as crying when there is a great deal of noise in the room, the caregiver might move the child to a quieter room or try to turn down the volume in the room (such as by asking older children to try to engage in a more quiet activity)



**Emotional Regulation**—The caregiver is aware of the child's temperament and helps maintain a manageable level of stress.

*Example:* A child who has displayed a shy temperament might show signs of stress in a room crowded with people, so the caregiver might offer spaces that are more secluded.

**Attention Regulation**—The caregiver offers the child opportunities for focusing and sharing attention with activities involving objects or social interactions.

*Example:* When the child seems rested and alert, the caregiver might engage the child in an interaction with an interesting toy or in a face-to-face interaction (such as during meal time).



Physiological, emotional and attention regulation continue to be developed throughout childhood with the support of caring adults, but the foundations of these skills are established during infancy and toddlerhood.

## Preschoolers and Emotional Regulation:

- Preschoolers are developing a sense of who they are as an individual and how to identify, understand, and express emotions appropriately.
- Emotional expression and regulation is highly complex and involves biological (temperamental) and environmental (social and cultural) factors.
- Experiences with both peers and adults that allow children to practice and see models of regulation, including a broad range of emotions, are important for developing appropriate strategies for regulation.
- Preschoolers still need adult guidance in thinking through the regulation process and understanding the emotions of others. Guidance might involve using language to support regulation, offering a comfort or transition object, or encouraging a peer relationship that offers appropriate models for or opportunities to practice emotional regulation.

## How can caregivers support self-regulation?

- Stay calm and be aware of the ways in which your own regulation might be challenged and strategies that you might need in order to remain calm
- Provide supports or strategies that are suitable for the individual child and their age
- Offer alternatives
- Observe and read cues to try to understand why the child's regulation is challenged and be responsive
- Be proactive and create predictability by being consistent and using routines
- Create a developmentally appropriate environment with defined age appropriate limits

## Resources:

Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early child development. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Day, M., & Parlakian, R. (2003). How culture shapes social-emotional development: Implications for practice in infant-family programs. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.

Tronick, E. (2007). The neurobehavioral and social-emotional development of infants and children. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.