

Self-Regulation: The Key to Successful Students?

New research suggests that children who learn to mind their P's and Q's may also have an easier time learning their ABC's and 123's. In a new study conducted by the University of Virginia's Claire Cameron Ponitz and Oregon State University's Megan McClelland, the researchers found that kindergarteners who had high levels of "self-regulation" in the fall did better on tests of reading, vocabulary, and math in the spring when compared to children with low levels of self-regulation.



What is self-regulation? According to Dr. Ponitz, self-regulation is the ability to control and direct one's own feelings, thoughts, and actions. It can be as simple as a child raising his hand when asking a question in class, or as complex as a child controlling her feelings when frustrated or angry. "Self-regulation underlies our daily decisions and long-term behavioral tendencies," Ponitz says. "When people make poor choices - for example about health, school, work, or relationships, it is usually because of a failure of self-regulation. With regard to early development, children who learn to control themselves and make good choices do better socially and academically than children who are overly angry, aggressive or impulsive."

While the ability to self-regulate has long been considered an essential part of a child's healthy emotional development, self-regulation is increasingly being seen as a good predictor of a child's academic success. According to Dr. McClelland, a number of studies have found that self-regulation significantly predicts literacy outcomes in children. In their own research, McClelland and Ponitz found that aspects of self-regulation not only predicted literacy outcomes in preschool and elementary school, but also predicted the gains in literacy children made during that time. In specific, they found that children who showed improvement on a simple task designed to measure self-regulation skills also showed improvement in emergent literacy, vocabulary, and early mathematics skills. "We think it's because the skills in the task-- remembering instructions, stopping yourself, and paying attention-- are also important in school," Ponitz says.

Good self-regulation skills are also important for a child's social development. "Self-regulation helps children succeed in classroom contexts," McClelland says. "The children who can successfully navigate these learning environments have better relationships with their teachers, are more liked by their classmates, and do better academically. They are also more motivated to achieve because of these skills."

Both Ponitz and McClelland believe parents and teachers play a crucial role in the development of their children's self-regulation. "Parents and teachers are critically important guides and models for children as they learn how to control themselves," Ponitz says. "At home and in the classroom, providing organization, consistency, and structure seem to be important predictors of children's self-regulation. For example, following through with rules provides children the chance to practice controlling themselves."

McClelland agrees that self-regulation is a learned skill. "There is a lot of evidence to suggest that self-regulation can be taught in children." As an example she points to an intervention aimed at improving self-regulation in preschoolers. "In one recent study," she says, "we found that a series of classroom games in preschool designed to help children practice paying attention, remembering instructions, and demonstrating self-control significantly improved self-regulation skills, especially for children with low self-regulation."

The good news for parents and educators is that easy ways to help children develop self-regulation skills may be as close as the local playground. Both Ponitz and McClelland suggest that classic games where children must follow directions and wait to take turns may be particularly suited for the development of self-regulation. Specifically, they recommend:

- **Red Light, Green Light.** One child is the stoplight, the other children are the cars. When the stoplight yells "Green light!" the children run towards the stoplight. When the stoplight yells "Red light!" all the children must stop. If a child doesn't stop, they must go back to the starting line. A popular variation is to include a "Yellow light!" where children must walk instead of run. Excellent for developing self-regulation skills because children must learn to pay attention, follow directions, and wait their turn.
- **Simon Says.** When Simon says, "Simon says jump!" the children must jump. But if Simon only says, "Jump!" and somebody jumps, that person must sit out for the rest of the game. The last person standing becomes the new Simon. Another excellent game for developing self-regulation because children must listen carefully, pay attention, and follow directions.
- **Hide n' Seek.** One child is "it" while the other children hide. After counting to ten, the "it" player must look until all the other children are found. The first player found becomes "it." Good for developing self-regulation because children must learn to wait patiently and quietly.
- **Role Playing.** Ponitz believes that role-playing games in which children pretend to be another person for an extended period of time may also provide opportunities for children "to think about their choices and not give in to their immediate impulses." For example, have one child pretend to be the teacher while the rest of the children pretend to be the students.

To make the games even more challenging, McClelland recommends adding rules that require children to pay attention, remember new instructions, and do the opposite of what they are used to. For instance, instead of having children follow commands when a person says "Simon says..." do the opposite and have them follow commands when the phrase isn't used. Be creative! As research increasingly shows, simple games can be more than mere child's play when it comes to helping children develop valuable skills that will serve them well later in life.