Self-Regulation, Self-Control, and the Practice of Shanker Self-Reg®

Susan Hopkins EdD, Stuart Shanker DPhil, and Rebecca Leslie BEd

Abstract

The Shanker Self-Reg® framework, based on the psychophysiological understanding of self-regulation and the hierarchy of human stress responses, differs from programs rooted in self-control-based conceptions of self-regulation. Self-Reg is a process rather than a program. It applies to everyone — children, youth and adults — rather than students in general, or specific age groups or subgroups of students. Self-Reg encourages reflective thinking that helps people understand and respond to stressors and internal states in order to bring online the brain mechanisms that enable exercise self-control, learning and overall well-being. These differences are illuminated through a comparison of Self-Reg to two popular self-regulation programs.

Introduction

One of the central tenets in all the work we do with parents and educators is that Self-Reg is a process and not a program. But why not both? Why is it so important to draw this distinction, and if it is so important that we avoid seeing Self-Reg as a program, what sort of process is it and how is this mastered?

The key to answering this question lies in the fundamental Self-Reg principle: “See a child differently and you see a different child.” Recognize, for example, when a child is exhibiting stress behaviour rather than misbehaving, and you immediately begin to consider what the stresses might be that are over-loading this child. But so much more is involved here than a
simple change in perspective. If you see that a child is in fight-or-flight rather than being oppositional, everything about your interaction with that child instantly changes: what you feel and how you respond; the subtle cues that you give off in your tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, and so on; and what the child feels and how the child responds. Such an “aspect-shift” does not come easily, or all at once. For one thing, we ourselves have a limbic system that is easily aroused by a child’s arousal, and our own fight-or-flight reaction is easily triggered when this happens. For another, we have a deeply entrenched mindset that sees all stress behaviour as misbehaviour, and therefore as a sign of weakness or self-indulgence. Then there is the fact that we have a scientific culture telling us that it is relatively straightforward to produce the behaviours that we want, and if you are not seeing the intended results you need to try harder. And there are insidious thoughts, like: “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” or “That’s how I was raised and I turned out okay.”

In practicing Self-Reg, we are forever asking: “Why am I seeing this behaviour or reaction?”: bearing in mind that every child is different and every situation is different. Accordingly, Self-Reg is inherently flexible and adaptive. It demands observation, reflection, trial and error, and self-awareness. It sees the learning curve as open-ended and, for that matter, endless. And above all, it seeks to transform a me–them relationship, where children or students are seen as needing to be controlled, to an I–thou relationship that is nurtured by understanding and insight.

All of these reasons help those of us who are practitioners to understand why it is so important to see Self-Reg as a process and not a program. One of the biggest problems with many programs – even, as we’ll see below, programs that are explicitly intended to foster self-regulation – is that they may actually impede the sort of reflective thinking that Self-Reg inspires. There is a danger here that the authoritarian mindset towards children gets transferred to those following the program. That is, the drive for inquisitiveness is replaced by the demand for fidelity; thinking that should be creative becomes regimented. And the demarcation between self-control and self-regulation is blurred: in some cases, even obliterated.
Distinguishing Between Programs for Self-Control and Self-Regulation as a Process

There is a fundamental conceptual distinction between self-control and self-regulation. It is a critical distinction because the two concepts are frequently confounded (Shanker, 2016). As a result, it is not at all clear, when a program of some kind has shown to have had some positive effects on children’s attention, mood, or behaviour, whether these were due to the self-control or the self-regulation component, or possibly a synergistic effect between the two. The second reason why it is vital to be clear on this distinction is that it brings to the fore the question of what we should be endeavouring to teach: is it self-control, or is it self-regulation?

The answer for Self-Reg is clearly self-regulation. Self-regulation is, in fact, what makes self-control possible. In a state of heightened stress, a child is unable to benefit from training designed to foster self-control. The key to changing a child’s trajectory is to identify and reduce his stress load, rather than trying to teach better self-control; the latter emerges naturally as a result of improved self-regulation. But this in turn raises the question: How do we “teach” self-regulation at a universal level, especially considering the additional challenge that what is a stressor for one child may not be for another, and that, even for the same child, what may be a stressor in one moment may not be in another when the child is in a different physical or emotional state.

It is this individual variability of stress-reactivity that represents our greatest challenge as we undertake to institute and assess universal approaches to enhancing self-regulation. Clinical studies have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to enhance a child’s self-regulation, and that doing so results in meaningful developmental changes (Casenhiser, Binns, McGill, Morderer, & Shanker, 2015; Casenhiser, Shanker, & Steiben, 2013). But again, do we take such a clinical approach to scale to help those children who might be struggling, but also to enhance the self-regulation of all children? And if so, how? To complicate the issue still further, what proves to be effective might vary from person to person, classroom to classroom, school to school, community to community. So rather than thinking of instituting a universal self-regulation program, we need to think of self-regulation as an educational process.
One response has been to teach children various types of relaxation and meditation practices in order to help them learn how to control their thoughts and emotions. Here too we see mixed results: many children find such activities taxing because it’s dysregulating in some way. The dysregulation is unique to the individual. Perhaps the child is not yet developmentally ready to focus on her breathing, or to sit still for longer than a few minutes because she has not yet developed sufficient “emotional intelligence” to understand, much less identify and express, what she is feeling, or because of sensory-motor compromises that render these exercises highly stressful rather than calming.

It is understandable that educators might be drawn to programs that promise a “quick fix” to problems in self-regulation, but our experience has been that there is no such thing: especially with children. All too often, the quick fix in question turns out to be trying to teach the children about self-regulation, as opposed to helping them learn how to self-regulate. Take a concept like calmness, which is actually quite complicated: it has a physical component (the feeling of relaxed muscles, your heart and breathing slowing down); an emotional component (the enjoyment of the feeling of calming down); and a cognitive element (the awareness of what one is experiencing). Without a mastery of all three elements, children can easily confuse being quiet with being calm. They really don’t know, in their body, what “calm” means, let alone regard this as a pleasant state. In fact, just the opposite is often the case: they might comply, but only from a wish to please their teacher, or because of the power dynamics, and not from any genuine awareness of their tension and a desire to release it. So, it turns out once again that it is self-control that we are unwittingly working on, and not self-regulation.

A self-control focus overlooks the major question of whether such programs are beneficial. Even if it were shown that teaching children to control their impulses is effective in primary school, as has been argued, we would still be left with the serious question of whether it would be beneficial to attempt something similar in early learning centres and older grades, or whether using behaviour modification techniques to try to instil self-control in children might lead to problems in mood, attention, and behaviour.

The child might well become more compliant – at least for the short term – as a result of such self-control oriented practices, while undergoing and even becoming habituated to a state of heightened arousal. It is important to keep in mind that being quiet and still should not be conflated with being calm and attentive. These concepts belong to very different families with very different histories and, indeed, are subserved by very different parts of the
brain. The former is concerned with acquiring the “cognitive competencies” (Mischel, 2014) and even the “willpower” (Baumeister & Tierney, 2011) to inhibit impulses and ignore distractions; the latter is concerned with understanding and reducing the causes of heightened arousal that leads to impulsivity and distractibility (Shanker, 2012). If learning and well-being are our priorities, we are after calm and attentive; quiet and still denotes compliance (or worse, a “freeze” response to stressors), and these states seldom live side by side.

Comparing Approaches to Developing Students’ Self-Regulation

Programs targeting outcomes of self-regulation are used in schools. Consider the challenges discussed of the common confounding of self-control and self-regulation in the psychophysiological sense and it becomes clear that there are not only different approaches to developing self-regulation in students, but also different theoretical foundations of these programs. While they may appear to be interchangeable, they may in fact be working on very different priorities. Two common programs we have come across in North American schools that address self-regulation are: Zones of Regulation® and MindUp®. With a goal of clarifying similarities and differences among these self-regulation-focused approaches, we undertook a scan of these two programs alongside the Shanker Self-Reg® framework (see Figure 1).
**Figure 1: Comparison of Programs against Shanker Self-Reg®**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zones of Regulation®</th>
<th>MindUP®</th>
<th>Shanker Self-Reg®</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What?</strong></td>
<td>A systemic, cognitive approach used to teach self-regulation by categorizing all the different ways we feel and states of alertness into four concrete zones.</td>
<td>A social-emotional learning curriculum intended to be an integral part of a classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition of Self-Regulation</strong></td>
<td>“the ability to do what needs to be done to be in the optimal state for the given situation” A life-long process Successful self-regulation via three critical neurological components: • sensory processing; • executive functioning; • emotional regulation.</td>
<td>“MindUP is dedicated to the belief that the child who learns to monitor his or her own senses and feelings becomes more aware and better understands how to respond to the world reflectively instead of reflexively.” <strong>Self-management:</strong> regulating emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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## Self Regulation Institute

Where science rises to the ever-changing, ever more complex stresses of modern life

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<tr>
<th>Central Tenets</th>
<th>SEL curriculum is intended as integral part of a classroom, with a focus on:</th>
<th>Involves understanding the trine metaphor of the brain, the stress response system, and learning to manage brain-body energy and tension with these guiding values:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aims to teach students how to become more aware and independent in controlling their emotions and impulses; managing sensory need; improving ability to problem-solve conflicts. | • Self-awareness  
• Self-management / self-regulation  
• Social awareness  
• Relationship skills  
• Responsible decision-making | Shanker SelfReg® is a universal platform (not a targeted intervention or behaviour management program); Self-Reg is a process not a program; ALL people are capable of self-regulation, no matter the age, stage, or ability level; Each individual, family, culture, and community holds unique Self-Reg expertise; There is no single set way to do Self-Reg; There are no quick fixes; Self-Reg is a continual and reflective process; Self-Reg for everyone, it is not just about children and youth; The well-being of children is inseparable from the well-being of critical adults in their lives. |
| Core Practice: deep belly breathing and attentive listening | | |

| Tools, Teach & Practice | Sensory supports  
Calming techniques  
Thinking strategies | Core Practice (CP)  
Mindful behaviour | The Shanker Method®  
Dynamic System of the 5 Domains |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|

| Intended Audience | Two to four students with the same cognitive abilities working with one facilitator or eight to ten students working with two facilitators from 4 years old at or above average intellect | Classroom of students from Pre-K to Grade 8 (material tailored for three separate grade segments: Pre-K - Grade 2; Grade 3 - 5; Grade 6-8) | Everyone (all ages, cultures, contexts). |

| | | | |
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<th>Delivery</th>
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<th>Anyone (all ages, cultures, contexts).</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How Self-Regulation is Assessed/Tracked</strong></td>
<td>Check-ins (or communication boards) informal observation of student behavior. More formal observation of student behavior, including data collection and point sheets.</td>
<td>Rubric for Self-Reg Competencies (educators assessing implementation). Rubric for personal Self-Reg (adults). <em>Further assessment tools in process of being created.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tools / Resources Available Described as “practice based on evidence versus an evidence-based practice” (Retrieved from <a href="http://www.zonesofregulation.com">www.zonesofregulation.com</a>) Two research studies completed and two research studies in progress</td>
<td>A peer-reviewed program in use for over ten years, accredited by CASEL Schonert-Reichl, 2014; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Maloney; Schonert-Reichl; Whiteside Arruda, &amp; Lawler, 2016</td>
<td>Research in progress in five areas: The 5 Domains of Stress Transition Conditions Between Positive &amp; Negative Stressors Refining Scientific Theories Self-Reg in Practice Review of Self-Reg Measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework / Program Research</td>
<td>18 sequenced lessons, 30-60 min/lesson RED: extremely heightened alertness and intense emotions YELLOW: elevated emotions and alertness GREEN: calm alertness and optimal learning BLUE: low state of alertness and down feelings</td>
<td>Fifteen sequenced lessons, 10–15 min/day Strategies integrated throughout class content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Sylbs of Framework / Program</td>
<td>Fifteen sequenced lessons, 10–15 min/day Strategies integrated throughout class content 4 Units: Getting Focused (3 lessons) Sharpening Your Senses (6 lessons) All About Attitude (3 lessons) Taking Action Mindfully (3 lessons)</td>
<td></td>
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The Shanker Self-Reg® framework, which is based on the psychophysiological understanding of self-regulation, is set apart from the other two programs compared in Figure 1 because it addresses the hierarchy of stress responses as outlined by Porges (2001): social engagement, fight-or-flight, and freeze. Where MindUp and Zones of Self-Regulation require a state of control to self-manage, engage in, and respond to the stressors experienced in a given moment or in reflection, the practice of Self-Reg encompasses the fight, flight, and freeze states, and neuroception in general – the limbic system’s response to feeling unsafe. Note that this is different than thinking about or talking about these states. In Self-Reg the focus is on responding to these states. This is precisely the reason why self-regulation makes self-control possible: it brings the brain mechanisms involved “online” and ensures they are able to respond with control when needed, although it should be noted that, the better the child self-regulates, the less the need for self-control.

Conclusion

As is clear from the foregoing, the reflective practice of Self-Reg is about so much more than just instituting an attitudinal shift; it is about developing an understanding of behaviour that is grounded in the recent advances that have occurred in psychophysiology and neuroscience. The more we learn about the dynamic interplay between neocortical and subcortical processes, the clearer it becomes that the emphasis on self-control is often misplaced and, in many cases, harmful.

To this end, The MEHRIT Centre (TMC) provides resources on Self-Reg, including blogs, printable information sheets, videos, podcasts, a parenting magazine, newsletters, and presentations. Opportunities to take courses and become certified in the Foundations of Self-Reg, or to become a facilitator of others’ learning the method, are available, as are face-to-face learning options and online communities.

Our experience to date has been that it is only by engaging in this sort of intensive learning experience that self-regulation truly comes to life: not simply in terms of the “new way of seeing children” described above, but also in terms of a new way of seeing ourselves, our own stresses, and the need to work on our own self-regulation. And this may be the most important point of all: Self-Reg is a process of change. And it applies to all: children, teens, parents, teachers, young adults, seniors. Everyone.
References


