

SELF-REG in THE EARLY YEARS



Self-Regulation in Preschoolers

The early years are a time of extraordinary growth and development. Children’s capacity for self-regulation—how they manage energy expenditure in response to stressors and then recover from the effort—is wired during these critical years. Trajectories are set early and once set can be difficult to change later in life. Anyone concerned with the healthy development of a young child needs to pay close attention to the child’s self-regulation.

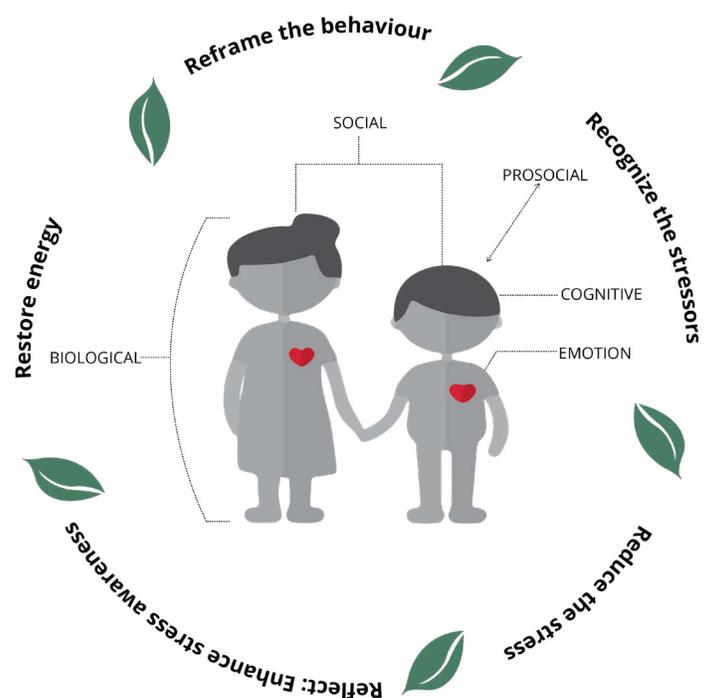
Unfortunately, self-regulation is often confused with self-control, which leads people to think that effective discipline is key. Behaviour modification techniques and programs designed to instill self-control in young children can have short-term success. However, this approach might also lead to additional longer-term problems in mood, attention and behaviour.

Similarly, self-regulation should not be confused with the ability to control emotions or social emotional learning (SEL) programs designed to teach emotion-regulation. However, there is an intimate link between SEL and self-regulation. Helping children develop effective self-regulation in the early years sets the underlying foundation for successful SEL over their whole lives.

At its core, self-regulation refers to the manner in which a child recovers from the expenditure of energy required to deal with stressors. Prolonged and excessive stress (allostatic overload) can put a child into fight or flight, or freeze, which significantly affects “higher” functions such as language, social cognition, executive functions and, indeed, self-control.

Self-Reg: A Valuable Tool

Shanker Self-Reg® is a process for enhancing self-regulation by understanding and dealing with stress. In Self-Reg we consider both our responses to stress and how stress affects our ability to maintain a healthy energy/tension balance. Self-Reg looks at stress across five domains: biological, emotion, cognitive, social, and prosocial. Heightened stress in any or all of these domains leads to problems in behaviour, mood, learning, and overall development. Identifying and reducing children’s stressors is the first step towards easing their stress levels and bringing them back to a calm and focused state, and ultimately improving their ability to self-regulate.



Stressors can vary significantly from child to child. What is a stressor for one child may not be for another. And what may be a stressor in a child one moment, may not be in another when the child is in a different physical or emotional state. Common stressors for children in the early years include:

- The child's biology—for example, their sensory/motor system
- Insufficient sleep
- Poor diet (high in processed foods)
- Lack of physical activity
- Stressors in the environment—for example, too much noise, light or crowding.
- Difficulty understanding the patterns and non-verbal aspects of social interaction

Clinical studies have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to enhance children's self-regulation, and that doing so results in meaningful improvements in any or all of the above five domains.

However, there is no such thing as a "quick fix," or a "one-size-fits-all" solution to building self-regulation in young children. It's a gradual, educational and experiential process. Self-Reg can help us understand and respond to the roots of behaviour, learning, motivation and social problems in young children, which are almost always related to excess stress.

The Five Practices of Self-Reg

Shanker Self-Reg® has five accessible practices that parents and other caregivers can take to understand and address self-regulation problems in children, whether it's a chronic issue or something that's happening "right now."

1. Reframe the behaviour. Learn to distinguish between misbehaviour and stress behaviour.
2. Recognize the stressors.
3. Reduce the stress.
4. Reflect: Enhance stress awareness.
5. Restore energy.

These practices have proven very successful in helping parents and teachers nurture happier and healthier children. They can be applied to individuals, groups of children, or indeed, to the caregivers themselves. How they are applied will vary in execution across centres, classrooms, communities and families. With the right kind of support, the results can happen fast.

Contact The MEHRIT Centre at info@self-reg.ca or visit www.self-reg.ca for further information.

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