

Self-Regulation: The Second Core Strength

By Bruce Duncan Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

The ability to self-regulate is the second of six core strengths that are an essential part of healthy emotional development. These core strengths are the foundation of Scholastic's company-wide program, *Keep the Cool in School: A Scholastic Campaign Against Violence and Verbal Abuse*. In this article, Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., explores self-regulation and how it contributes to preventing aggression and anti-social behaviors in children.

Self Regulation The Second Core Strength

"Mine! Mine!" The 4-year-old yelled, stamped his feet, grabbed at the toy, pushed his classmate, and finally collapsed to the floor sobbing and inconsolable. This was his third "tantrum" in the last two days.

A just-fed newborn, rocking in the arms of her loving parent, is warm, full, calm, and safe. Her needs are met-for now. But soon, her body will use all of the food, her mother will put her down, and a loud bang will startle her. When this happens, her body tells her-I'm hungry, alone, and in danger. She feels distress and also feels unable to regulate herself. So dependent, her only response is to cry out, hoping that a responsive adult will come to protect and feed her.

Again and again, attentive teachers respond to the needs of the dependent child. When infants and children are incapable of meeting their own needs, they depend upon the external regulation that comes from attentive, caring adults. It is in the context of this loving attention that a special bond grows between the dependent child and the teacher-attachment bonds. A responsive teacher provides the stimulation that helps the child's brain develop the capacity for creating and maintaining healthy emotional relationships.

At the same time, in these same interactions, other crucial areas of the infant's brain are being shaped-the stress-response systems.

Responding to Stress

The brain is continually sensing and responding to the needs of the body. Specialized "thermostats" monitor our internal (for instance, levels of oxygen and sugar in the blood) and external worlds. When they sense something is wrong (that the body is "stressed"), they activate the brain's alarm systems. These stress-response systems then act to help the body get what it needs.

Much of this regulation takes place automatically-beyond our awareness. But as we mature, our brain requires that we actively participate in our own regulation. When the internal world needs food or water or the external world is overwhelming, or threatening, our body "tells" us. If we thirst, we seek water; when afraid, we prepare to fight or flee. In short, we "self-regulate." We act in response to the sensations and feelings that arise from our brain's alarm systems.

When these systems develop normally, we are able to deal with complex and challenging situations with age-appropriate solutions. By adulthood, these should be thoughtful and creative. When a child's capacity for self-regulation does not develop normally, he will be at risk for many problems-from persistent tantrums to impulsive behaviors to difficulty regulating sleep and diet.

What helps the stress-response systems develop in an optimal way is repetitive exposure to controllable "challenges." Every time a child is introduced to something new, a low-level alarm response is activated. But with repetition comes mastery, and what the brain once interpreted as a potential threat is now familiar and tolerable. It is not bad for the child to experience low levels of "anxiety" or distress when he is in a safe and responsive setting. Indeed, when the child gets a little hungry, there is no need to cry because he now knows that that feeling will go away soon ("We have snack time after free play"). Moderate, predictable stress in this responsive, controllable environment leads to resilience. Children become capable of tolerating significant distress. In turn, unpredictable or severe stress can lead to a hyper-reactive stress-response system and a host of problems.

Central to the process of healthy development of stress-response capability is that children learn to read their bodies' signals.

Understanding Body Signals

Many of the sensations we feel when we are "out of regulation" are clear-thirst, for example. But the body tends to use a common set of "alarm" sensations for many different kinds of potential threats. The alarm response and the resulting feelings caused by frustration are very similar to those caused by fear. A fearful child may act sullen and "angry," unaware that they are actually anxious about starting in a new classroom. A hungry child may act distracted, irritable, and noncompliant, again unaware that the internal distress they feel is hunger. We all have had times when we have mislabeled these feelings. Sleep deprivation, illness, physical exhaustion, and family distress are among the things that can activate the alarm response and result in a set of behaviors that are misunderstood by teachers and by the children themselves.

Sometimes, we just can't get what we need right away. We must endure the discomfort related to exhaustion, hunger, thirst, or fear. Learning to tolerate this distress, to correctly label the uncomfortable sensations, and to develop appropriate, mature ways to respond to these signals is central to healthy development. (When you are hungry or tired, you really aren't mad at someone-so you need not act mad. Just remember to eat something between lunch and a late dinner.)

How Self-Regulation Matures

The capacity for self-regulation matures as we grow. Infants are born with an undeveloped capacity to self-regulate. The dehydrated infant can not use words to ask for water nor can he get water. The infant feels thirst, distress and then cries, dependent upon an attuned adult to meet her needs. The transition from external regulation to self-regulation is one of the most important tasks of growing up.

Healthy self-regulation is related to the capacity to tolerate the sensations of distress that accompany an unmet need. The first time the infant felt hunger, she felt discomfort, then distress and then she cried. An attuned adult responded. And after thousands of cycles of hunger, discomfort, distress, response, and satisfaction, the child has learned that this feeling of discomfort, even distress, will soon pass. An adult will come. The attuned, responsive teacher helps the child build in the capacity to put a moment between the impulse and the action.

As young children learn to read and respond appropriately to these inner cues, they become much more capable of tolerating the early signs of discomfort and distress that are related to stress, hunger, fatigue,

and frustration. When a child learns to tolerate some anxiety, he will be much less reactive and impulsive. This allows the child to feel more comfortable and act more "mature" when faced with the inevitable emotional, social, and cognitive challenges of development.

With the capacity to put a moment between a feeling and an action, the child can take time to think, plan, and usually come up with an appropriate response to the current challenge. For example, if you want another turn, wait in line and learn to tolerate the frustration of not getting exactly what you want exactly when you want it.

When to Worry

Many children have difficulty with self-regulation. Their stress-response systems are poorly organized and hyper-reactive. This could be related to many factors, including genetic predisposition, developmental insults (such as lack of oxygen in utero), or exposure to chaos, threats, and violence. (Indeed, due to recent events, many children will exhibit difficulties with self-regulation—at least over this next six months). Children with poor self-regulation disrupt an entire classroom. They are often impulsive, hypersensitive to transitions, and tend to overreact to minor challenges or stressors. They may be inattentive or physically hyperactive. These children benefit from the structure, predictability, and enrichment that schools provide. Unfortunately this may not be enough. The degree of attention and nurturing that these children need is often beyond the capacity of a pre-school or kindergarten setting. If these problems are extreme and persistent, or if the behaviors disrupt the class, the child should be referred for further evaluation.

Helping Children Self-Regulate

- * Model self-control and self-regulation in your words and actions when you are frustrated with a classroom situation.

- * Provide structure and predictability. Children with self-regulation problems are internally "unstructured." The more freedom and flexibility they have, the more likely they are to demonstrate uncontrolled behaviors.

- * Anticipate transitions and announce changes in classroom schedules.

- * Reward children with good self-regulation capabilities with freedom and flexibility that will offer them opportunities for spontaneous, creative play and learning.

- * Try to identify the most "reactive" and impulsive children and keep them apart from each other. Pairing children who face these challenges can escalate the problem.

- * Remember that impulsive and aggressive children can create an atmosphere of chaos and fear that inhibit the capacity of other children to learn. Don't be afraid to immediately re-direct inappropriate words and actions. Your actions will make the rest of the children feel safer.

- * Seek help. Don't be afraid to point out a child's self-regulation problems with parents or other school personnel. Early identification and intervention can save the child and family years of failure and pain.

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Dr. Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., is an internationally recognized authority on brain development and children in crisis. Dr. Perry leads the ChildTrauma Academy, a pioneering center providing service, research and training in the area of child maltreatment (www.ChildTrauma.org). In addition he is the Medical Director for Provincial Programs in Children's Mental Health for Alberta, Canada. Dr. Perry served as consultant on many high-profile incidents involving traumatized children, including the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado; the Oklahoma City Bombing; and the Branch Davidian siege. His clinical research and practice focuses on traumatized children—examining the long-term effects of trauma in children, adolescents and adults. Dr. Perry's work has been instrumental in describing how traumatic events in childhood change the biology of the brain. The author of more than 200 journal articles, book chapters, and scientific proceedings and is the recipient of a variety of professional awards.