

Supporting
the Educators
Who Support
Children and
Families—The
Team Behind
the Teacher

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The Regulated Learning Environment: Supporting Adults to Support Children

At an early childhood center in Cleveland, Ohio, Kris finishes setting up containers of glue, paint, and a basket of colored sequins at an activity station in her preschool classroom. “Circle time,” she calls. “I need everyone to stop what you are doing and sit down at your place on the rug.” Jayden bounds boisterously toward the rug, arms swinging as he goes. Kris turns around just in time to see Jayden knock the glue upside down, into the basket, and onto the floor. As the children run through the puddle of sequins and glue screaming, “Miss Kris, Jayden made a mess!” her head starts to pound, her body begins to feel tense, and her heart starts to beat a little faster. She is aware of a feeling of helplessness, as though the classroom is dissolving into chaos and there is nothing she can do to stop it. Kris already started the day exhausted. Now, she feels her eyes start to swell with tears. But a large poster of a traffic light on yellow catches her eye, and she remembers what she reminds the children to do in stressful situations or when they feel they are losing control. She pauses, keeping her eyes on the poster, and takes three deep breaths—the length of her inhale matching the length of her exhale. Then, in a calm but firm voice, she says, “I spent a lot of time preparing that project, and I feel sad that it spilled. Jayden, I know bumping it was an accident and that you must be feeling bad about it. Let’s clean it up together.”

ONE OF THE CENTRAL FUNCTIONS OF preschool is to provide children with the social and early academic skills that lead to healthy development and school success.

A subset of these skills—often broadly referred to as self-regulation—includes the abilities to control physical, verbal, and mental impulses; to set goals and monitor progress toward these goals; and to focus attention on particular and appropriate tasks (Raver et al. 2011; Skibbe et al. 2011). But to provide children with opportunities to develop self-regulation, teachers must use these skills and model effective strategies themselves—to a high degree. The early childhood classroom may well be one of the most taxing settings for adult self-regulation. In this setting, children's interactions can be unpredictable, their emotions often run high, and their behavior is sometimes challenging; after all, it is between the ages of 4 and 6 years that children do the majority of the learning that is associated with their lifelong ability to regulate their own behavior, attention, and emotions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2011).

The purpose of this article is to explore practices that support the healthy development of young children from vulnerable populations by focusing on the self-regulation strategies of adults in early childhood education settings. We begin by defining self-regulation and explaining how it develops. Next, we summarize why a sharpened ability to implement strategies that maximize one's own self-regulation is particularly important among early childhood educators. Finally, using lessons learned from promising interventions, we outline four guiding principles that may bolster early educators' own use of self-regulation strategies in the classroom, which intentionally influences children's emerging self-regulation and well-being, enhancing the quality of the classroom learning environment.

What is self-regulation and how can early educators model it?

Broadly, self-regulation includes the abilities to plan (e.g., how to approach an activity or solve a problem); maintain

attention to a specific task; and control impulsive behavior (Raver et al. 2011; Skibbe et al. 2011). When children possess these competencies, they are poised to manage their behavior and emotions and to engage in classroom interactions in positive and productive ways, ultimately promoting engagement in academic activities and learning (e.g., Raver 2012; Ursache, Blair, & Raver 2012). Research tells us that children develop self-regulation in the context of relationships with peers and adults (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). Under optimal conditions, teachers can positively influence the development of children's self-regulation in a number of ways—by modeling strategies that enable them to effectively manage their own emotions and behaviors, by engaging children in warm and positive interactions, and by teaching children strategies such as breathing deeply, self-reflecting, empathizing, and using positive language (Maurer & Brackett 2004; Jennings & Greenberg 2009; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2011; Roeser et al. 2012).

In the opening vignette, Kris used deep breathing when she started to feel stressed. Her actions showed that she—and the classroom of children—could calmly overcome the disruption, thus avoiding a negative, emotionally charged scene. How did she do this? First, she reflected on how she was feeling (helpless). Then, after breathing deeply to calm herself, she expressed an understanding of how Jayden was feeling (“I know you must be feeling bad”), and used positive language (“Let's clean it up together”) to encourage the children to take action toward solving the problem. In this example, Kris demonstrated how to manage a stressful situation with basic self-regulation strategies, and she laid the groundwork for positive interactions to follow, as opposed to reacting in a way that would likely escalate stress levels. In this article, we highlight the notion that providing classroom-based learning opportunities that help develop self-regulation, as Kris does, hinges on the teacher's ability to manage day-to-day classroom interactions, including potentially stressful ones, in open, positive, and productive ways.

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The importance of early childhood educators' self-regulation strategies

A well-honed ability to consistently deploy and model strategies that promote positive management of behavior and emotions opens the door for higher-quality interactions in any setting. This is particularly important among early childhood educators because stress levels tend to be high in this field, and access to resources tends to be low: common job pressures include high energy and time demands, ambiguity of roles and responsibilities, lack of social support and communication with colleagues, limited education, and low wages (IOM & NRC 2015; Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes 2014). These challenges may be magnified in vulnerable communities because young children living with the strains of poverty tend to exhibit more challenging behaviors, on average, than their peers (IOM & NRC 2015) and because early childhood educators often face the same substantial economic, family, and social stresses as their students.

When early childhood educators use and model well-developed self-regulation strategies, the children they teach are more likely to stay on task, avoid problem behaviors, and resolve conflicts.

A small body of research, conducted mostly with elementary school teachers, tells us that teachers' effective deployment of strategies for managing stress and challenging classroom situations influences their behaviors in the learning environment and their ability to support children (Brown et al. 2010; Li-Grining et al. 2010). When early childhood educators use and model well-developed self-regulation strategies, the children they teach are more likely to stay on task, avoid problem behaviors, and resolve conflicts (Jones & Bouffard 2012). Conversely, when stress overshadows or undermines the teacher's ability to deploy these strategies, adults' and children's stresses and unproductive behaviors can accumulate (Raver et al. 2009). For these reasons, we suggest that enhancing teachers' repertoire and deployment of self-regulation strategies in the classroom will improve their own well-being and will strengthen their ability to foster the same set of skills in children, promoting a regulated learning environment.

Sharpening early educators' self-regulation strategies in the classroom: A missing link in the professional landscape

Recent research suggests that early childhood educators have little access to training and professional support geared toward increasing the frequency and consistency with which they use and model strategies that promote

children's self-regulation (IOM & NRC 2015). Most existing initiatives focus on improving educators' technical skills or supplying children with tools to regulate their behaviors (e.g., Barnett et al. 2008). Such efforts often place little or no emphasis on supporting early childhood educators to develop for themselves the enhanced levels of self-regulation necessary for managing the significant energy and time demands inherent in early childhood education (McAllister et al. 2005; Raver et al. 2009).

And yet, providing capacity-building supports of this type is emerging in fields outside of education. In the corporate world, managers receive leadership coaching, including training in communication and decision-making techniques, under the assumption that strong leadership is not an inherent trait, but a set of skills to be cultivated. Additionally, in the medical field, mindfulness training focused on maintaining awareness of the self and others as a way to improve performance and offset burnout is increasingly offered during medical school and as continuing education for health care professionals (O'Reilly 2013).

Supporting adults to support children: What can we learn from promising initiatives?

Like adult airplane passengers who are advised in an emergency to put on their own oxygen masks before assisting children, adult caregivers in stressful environments are best positioned to help young children when they have the supports and skills to manage their own stresses and remain in control of their emotions and interactions. A few child development initiatives address, both directly and indirectly, the pressing need to sharpen early educators' self-regulation strategies for the classroom. These initiatives share the philosophy that children learn new skills through adults' direct teaching and modeling, and that teachers are only able to impart the skills that they possess and practice. Additionally, each initiative subscribes to the theory that socially and emotionally healthy adults are poised to support the development of healthy children.

In the sections that follow, we provide a synthesis of these existing classroom- and parent-focused initiatives. Examples from these efforts highlight four guiding principles that may inform programs and professional development initiatives designed to support adults' ability to model, apply, and teach self-regulation skills.

Guiding principle #1. Support adults' capacity to manage their own stress

One approach to building educators' self-regulation capacities is to regularly address their professional and personal stress and to provide mental health consultation when necessary. For example, two initiatives aimed

at improving preschoolers' emotional and behavioral skills—the Chicago School Readiness Project (CSRP) and its replication project, Foundations of Learning (FOL)—include stress management support and workshops for educators. A rationale behind the focus on stress management is, in part, based on research highlighting the potential to shift teachers' locus of control from external to internal (Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman 2010). Those who hold an internal locus of control focus attention on areas within their control (e.g., their thoughts and actions), releasing attachment to domains that are not within their control (e.g., the feelings and responses of others). Internal locus of control and the skills associated with it (e.g., the ability to plan, focus attention, and control impulsive behavior) allow teachers to create an orderly and predictable classroom. In such an environment, children know what to expect and what is expected of them; therefore they can establish adaptive patterns of behavior (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2011). On the other hand, an external locus of control is more likely to be linked to feelings of helplessness in day-to-day situations.

In the cases of CSRP and FOL, workshops for teachers are held midway during the academic year and address teachers' personal and professional stressors, including interacting with difficult colleagues, managing deadlines,

addressing domestic violence, handling financial challenges, and maintaining physical and mental health. Another program that provides adult caregivers with stress management support is Child FIRST, a home-based, voluntary program aimed at decreasing children's emotional and behavioral challenges, preventing developmental and learning problems, and addressing child abuse and neglect. This model includes a parent-child health intervention, during which program staff help parents reflect on their own childhood and relationships so they are better able to nurture their children. Additionally, parents reflect on connections between their children's behavior and the home environment.

In addition to the stress management approaches highlighted in these case examples, emerging research suggests other strategies teachers may use to regulate their emotions. These strategies include practicing yoga and secular meditation, reflecting on what has happened and why, using language that shows empathy and respect for others' thoughts and feelings, and articulating clear expectations of acceptable, productive behavior (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd 2013). Again, these strategies enable teachers to feel empowered in the context of classroom situations that regularly place high demands on their self-regulation capacities, allowing them to draw on their stored knowledge to maintain a productive classroom setting.



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Guiding principle #2. Teach the reciprocal nature of teacher and student interactions

Teachers' and students' interactions are reciprocal: teachers' actions trigger emotions and behaviors in their students, which in turn prompt subsequent responses in teachers (Roeser et al. 2012). Adults could benefit from gaining knowledge about how their own emotions, reactions, and interactions influence children's responses. In the opening scenario, Jayden's actions began a cycle of interactions that, depending on the responses of the teacher and his classmates, could have continued in either a productive or disruptive way. By calmly and thoughtfully responding to Jayden's mistake, Kris set this cycle of interactions in a positive direction; students were poised to follow her directions and were less likely to become increasingly off task. Notably, this cycle will then continue. If the students respond positively to Kris's directions, their behaviors will feed into Kris's sense of calm and focus and will contribute to the quality of her relationship with her students. On the other hand, if Kris had quickly reacted in an aggressive, or even helpless, manner, the cycle of interactions would have proceeded differently, potentially setting up a cycle of classroom disruption.

Teachers' and students' interactions are not only reciprocal in a given moment, but they can also be evident in future interactions. The following example from Kris's classroom illustrates the effect that teachers' modeling of self-regulated behavior may have on children.

Raphael has been working all morning to finish a block castle before the bell rings, signaling that it is circle time. From across the rug, Emmy marches over and kicks the castle so that it crumbles to the ground. Raphael's face colors and he opens his mouth wide, as if to howl. Pilar, who is sitting next to him, says, "Raphael, yellow light." This is a familiar reminder to slow down and reflect before taking action. Like Kris

did earlier, Raphael takes three breaths. Then, in a tearful but controlled voice, he says, "Emmy, I am very mad that you broke my castle. I want you to help me fix it."

If, in the earlier classroom example, Kris had yelled at Jayden for making a mess with the sequins, Raphael might have followed suit and yelled at Emmy for knocking down his castle. In contrast, Raphael imitated the calming strategies Kris used to achieve her goal. With support from Pilar, another child who had witnessed Kris's instruction and modeling, Raphael calmed himself by taking breaths and then used positive language in an effort to solve the problem.

Described in the previous section, CSRP and FOL are examples of programs that emphasize the reciprocal nature of teacher and student actions and provide teachers with explicit strategies to help manage their own behavior. These programs include a five-week training session during which teachers, teacher assistants, and consultants are introduced to specific behavior-management strategies. The strategies focus on concrete actions teachers can take to promote cycles of regulated classroom behaviors, such as offering praise and positive reinforcement, using positive social pressure, providing warnings and consequences, and ignoring undesirable behaviors when appropriate.

Teachers' actions trigger emotions and behaviors in their students, which in turn prompt subsequent responses in teachers.

Likewise, the Knox County Ohio Head Start program employs the Conscious Discipline program (Bailey 2001), aimed at helping adults manage their thoughts, feelings, and actions in the face of daily stresses and conflicts. Conscious Discipline provides trainings during which educators learn to communicate using a set of phrases intended to help them create positive cycles of interactions in their classrooms. Key elements of this language include focusing on desired outcomes (e.g., "Please keep your feet on the floor" rather than "Don't put your feet on the table"), and assertiveness with explanation (e.g., "I didn't like it when you pushed me" rather than "Oww, stop"). The Knox County Head Start program also offers a six-week Conscious Parenting series to systematically involve parents in the initiative.

Guiding principle #3. Continuously support teachers as they work to promote regulated classroom interactions

In addition to the initial training at the outset of an improvement effort, offering continuing education—in the form of materials, instructional supervision, and professional development—helps keep teachers informed and focused on their own actions and goals. This is

especially the case for programs aimed at promoting teachers' self-regulation. Building adults' capacity to create regulated classroom interactions cannot be accomplished through a one-off workshop; it requires sustained and supported learning opportunities that are connected to day-to-day practice. For example, throughout the first year of the Conscious Discipline program in Knox County, all staff members attended regular meetings and in-service trainings, were observed by supervisors and mentors, viewed training videos, and received a monthly newsletter related to the intervention.

Guiding principle #4. Establish trusting relationships within professional communities

Finally, for professional improvement in teachers' self-regulation, trust is key. To support adult development, there is a clear need for trusting, positive relationships, particularly in the context of encouraging participants to try strategies that may be new or may cause them to feel vulnerable or emotionally exposed. For example, in the Child FIRST initiative, parents were asked to work with a clinician to reflect on their own childhood experiences and behavior. Some families were hesitant to participate because of cultural stigmas associated with therapy or because of past negative experiences with social services, which left them feeling threatened by or distrustful of program staff. Clinicians worked to establish trusting,

positive relationships by building on families' strengths, knowledge, and current practices; working toward jointly conceived goals; and building on cultural beliefs.

CSRP is another program that takes explicit steps to establish trust. The CSRP mental health consultants foster positive relationships within professional communities by being careful to present themselves as teammates rather than experts. Additionally, during the first few weeks of the year, these programs provide time for team members to observe and get to know participants before offering advice or feedback.

Conclusion

Providing early educators with opportunities to enhance and sharpen their self-regulation strategies is particularly important given the professional demands of the early childhood setting. As demonstrated in the example from Kris's classroom, and from the programs and initiatives discussed here, when teachers have and use strong self-regulation strategies, they provide young children with opportunities to develop their own capacities to manage their behavior, attention, and emotions. Therefore, as the field moves forward with significant investments in improving the quality of the classroom learning environment, we recommend that a central component focus on sharpening early educators' use of self-regulation strategies.

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