



## You and Your Foster Child

# Self-regulation

Self-regulation is when your children are able to control their own behavior, emotions, and thoughts. Children are able to do this on their own without adults having to step in. Self-regulation is an important part of emotional and social development.

Developing self-regulation starts early. One of the first tasks is regulating your baby's sleeping and eating patterns. New babies are helpless and look to their caregivers to learn how to fulfill their needs. When you respond with love and nurturing, your baby feels secure. Knowing their needs will be met helps babies begin to develop the ability to soothe and regulate themselves. This ability may be underdeveloped among some foster children whose needs had been neglected.

Toddlers begin to identify different emotions and have some control over those emotions. But that control is limited, as seen by behaviors such as temper tantrums. Learning to control their emotions better helps them avoid such behavior.

For preschool-aged children, self-regulation involves learning to think things through to guide their behavior and set limits for themselves. They start to realize that behaviors such as tantrums and acting out are not acceptable and that alternatives exist. Self-regulation gives them greater control over their impulses, and they start to think before they act.

### Helping your child learn self-regulation and self-soothing

The following tips can help your child develop self-regulation.

### How self-regulation develops

Children's ability to self-regulate matures as they grow.

- Infants are born without the tools to be able to self-regulate well.
- Infants depend on their adult caregivers to understand what they need and meet those needs. For example, babies will feel thirst, then distress and cry because they are unable ask for water. An attentive adult will respond with water.
- Self-regulation is related to how well your child is able to tolerate feelings of discomfort and distress that come with an unmet need.
- When you respond time and again to your child's needs, he or she learns that feelings of hunger, thirst, discomfort, and distress will soon pass. This helps your child to be able to pause between impulse and action.
- Children become better able to tolerate early feelings of discomfort and distress as they develop. When your child learns to tolerate some anxiety, he or she will become less impulsive.

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- This will allow your child to feel more comfortable and act more “mature” when faced with emotional, social, and cognitive challenges.
- When children can pause between a feeling and an action, they can take time to think, plan, and come up with an appropriate response to a challenge. For example, children will tolerate the frustration of not being able to get another turn right away knowing that another turn will come if they simply wait in line.

## Helping your infant learn to self-soothe and self-regulate

- Set routines of all kinds—at eating, drinking, bathing, and bedtime—and stick to them.
- Routines help babies learn what to expect, which will help them relax and feel comfortable, making self-soothing come easier.
- Your baby might be struggling with self-soothing and self-regulation skills if he or she cries or has trouble falling asleep. Try bedtime strategies to ease this problem, and promote self-calming behaviors.
- For example, go through your bedtime routine. If your baby cries, pat or rub his or her back, etc. But don’t pick up your baby unless he or she is sick. Allow your baby to become calm with some help from you.
- Give your baby a safe, comforting item, such as a favorite blanket or teddy bear.

## Helping your preschooler learn to self-soothe and self-regulate

- Help your child with problem solving, such as planning and organizing activities. For example: “Try to think ahead about what you want to make. It will be easier to put the blocks in the right place that way.”

- Be a model of self-regulation. For example, restrain yourself from yelling when you are angry.
- Talk about your self-control out loud. For example: “I really want dessert. But first I have to clear the dinner dishes from the table.”
- Ask for self-control, but not too much. If your child can’t wait five minutes, don’t force it. But once your child can wait five minutes, expect it.
- Ignore inappropriate behaviors such as acting out or interrupting you while you are speaking with someone. Tell your child he or she must calm down first. Say it once. Show that you are waiting for them to be calm.
- Give your child routines and structure. “It’s six o’clock and time for supper. Wash your hands and come to eat.”

## Benefits of learning self-regulation

Learning self-regulation is one of the most important tasks of growing up. The benefits of self-regulated behavior will continue throughout your child’s life. They include:

- Being better liked by peers.
- Having more self-confidence and higher self-esteem.
- Being more independent.
- Having better cognitive and social skills.
- Doing better in school.
- Being better able to handle stress and frustration during adolescence.
- And a better chance of enjoying success as an adult.

