

# TABLE MATERIALS

## Self-Regulation Strategies from the Social-Emotional Development Domain



SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### 2.0 Self-Regulation

Preschool children work hard to manage their attention, feelings, impulses, and thoughts. They seek to cooperate with others, manage their upset feelings, and participate in classroom routines and transitions, but they need ongoing adult support for their efforts.<sup>30, 31</sup> Preschool children differ significantly in their abilities to pay attention in a group, finish a

task, cooperate with adults and peers, and express their strong feelings in ways that do not hurt others. Even young children who are sometimes able to do these things will probably not manage them independently all the time, but they will be more capable of self-regulation given adult guidance and support.

#### VIGNETTE

*Ms. Caitlin stumbles in the play yard while carrying a tray of bowls containing acorns, leaf pods, pinecones, and leaves. The items spill across the ground. She describes the accident: "Oh, no! I just sorted all of these, and now it looks like I'll have to do it all over again! It's so frustrating when things like this happen." She sighs and takes a deep breath. "Well, I guess I'll start with the acorns. It shouldn't take too long." Several children nearby offer to help and begin to pick up and sort the items. Teachers and children all work together for a few minutes, picking through the grass and sharing with each other about how many of each item they have found. When all the natural play materials have been sorted back into their bowls, Ms. Caitlin thanks the children and comments on how fast the job went with so many people helping.*

#### TEACHABLE MOMENT

In this situation the teacher models self-talk to turn an upsetting situation into a teachable moment about constructive emotional coping strategies. She describes the accident and expresses her feelings about it. She continues by modeling a constructive course of action to remedy the situation. The children nearby respond by starting to help pick up the various items (displaying empathy and caring). At the end of the job, she concludes the impromptu lesson by thanking her helpers and commenting on how much faster a job goes when so many people work together (generalizing from action to principle).



The following interactions and strategies can support children's growth in self-regulation skills:

**Use appropriately stimulating aesthetic elements** such as soothing colors, natural woods and fibers, and soft textures. When children feel calm and comfortable, they constructively interact with adults, peers, and learning materials. Neutral walls and furniture should fade into the background so that children can focus on their "work." Visual clutter should be avoided as much as possible.

**Eliminate or reduce background noise** to help children with learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, and hearing impairments attend to auditory input. Reducing background noise helps all children, including English learners, focus more readily on oral language as conversations take place near them while they are playing. For more information about strategies to support children who are English learners, see Chapter 5.

**Observe individual children closely**, especially as they interact with peers, encounter frustration, and are asked to cooperate with adult requests and group routines. Observing each child individually will help identify where that child needs the most adult support for learning (e.g., can the child maintain attention during group activities, show understanding of classroom routines, use language to express emotions, play cooperatively and negotiate disagreements with peers, ask for help when necessary?).

**Model behavior and attitudes toward others** as an effective way of teaching self-regulatory skills. Because young children closely observe and imitate the behavior of adults they care about,

## Research Highlight

Self-regulation is important to school readiness and early school success. One of the most important indicators of self-regulation is a young child's ability to pay attention in the classroom. In one recent study, researchers combined the results of several large-scale, long-term studies of children beginning from the preschool years and continuing well into school. They were interested in the qualities of preschoolers that best predicted how well they would do on school-age math and reading tests. The researchers found that early skill in math and reading was important to later success in these areas, of course. Beyond this, however, they also found that differences in self-regulation, particularly in attention, were important in later school success. Children who concentrated and listened attentively to the teacher as preschoolers and who were less impulsive and distractible achieved higher scores on math and reading tests after entering school.<sup>32</sup>

teachers can intentionally model desired behavior for them. Adults model appropriate concern for others' well-being by communicating with children in a respectful way and treating them the way they would like children to treat each other. They can model enthusiasm for persisting at a task until finishing it by sharing their thoughts while working alongside children (e.g., "It's taking a long time to finish this puzzle, but when we figure out how to fit in the last five pieces, we'll get to see the whole picture"). Finally, adults can model emotional self-control by expressing their own feelings constructively when encountering a problem.



**Maintain developmentally appropriate expectations for preschool children's behavior.** Make allowance for children's relatively limited capacity to sit and maintain focused attention by planning brief large-group activities and longer periods of self-initiated activity. Help children to manage complex tasks (e.g., getting ready to go outside in the rain) by breaking them down into simpler steps. Ensure that expectations for emotional self-control and behavioral control are appropriate for the child's age or developmental level. Supplying plenty of play materials decreases excessive frustration and increases on-task exploration.

**Guide and coach children's behavior** by using positive, respectful phrasing and tone to prompt problem solving and to give brief instructions and reminders: "Can you start by telling Jonah why you're so angry? Then we can work together on solving the problem," or "Since lunch will come soon, it's almost time to clean up our room and wash our hands so we'll be ready to eat."

**Reinforce children's good choices and link their actions to positive outcomes.** Express pleasure and acknowledge children's efforts when children handle situations in mature ways. Draw attention to specific ways a child's behavior made an experience successful: "I know you really wanted to share your story right away, but you waited patiently during Angela's turn. She was so happy to get to tell us about her papa."

**Provide a consistent but flexible daily routine.** A consistent daily routine facilitates children's trust and focus on the learning environment. This consistency helps English learners predict the day and navigate through it. When children can anticipate what comes now, next, and later, they are better able to regulate

their expectations, energy, and activity. Be flexible enough to follow children's emerging interests and allow them to finish projects when possible. Adults can prepare children ahead of time for occasional major changes in the daily routine in order to prevent unease and off-task behavior (e.g., "Today we are walking to the fire station before we eat snack. Usually we go outside after snack, but today we are doing something different"). Many children appreciate having the schedule in picture format, so they can independently check the schedule themselves. Taking pictures of the children themselves engaged in the various activities can be a fun way of making the schedule. Then, when there is a change, a new picture, such as one of a fire truck, can be put in place as a reminder of the change.



**Alternate between active and quiet activities.** Guiding children through appropriately varied levels of stimulation encourages self-regulation. It leads to more positive behavior and increases children's ability to fully engage with their learning environment, peers, and teachers.



**Time group experiences to match children’s developing attention spans, social skills, and self-control.** Attending to a group experience can be difficult for young children. Group experiences should be brief—between 10 and 15 minutes and, in some instances, up to 20 minutes—depending on children’s ages, understanding of the English language, past experiences, and levels of functioning. Ignoring a group’s need for a transition can lead to more disruptive behavior and a general lack of cooperation (e.g., a teacher’s insistence on finishing a book during a large-group story time despite children’s restlessness may cause more problem behavior and work against learning goals). For more information about strategies to support children who are English learners, see Chapter 5.

**Introduce children to relaxation exercises.** Stretching and relaxation exercises assist children in self-reflection and build self-regulation skills. Teachers can use calming activities informally as well as during group experiences and program transitions. An adult can soothe a frustrated child by drawing attention to the body’s response to stress: “You look really upset! Your face is red and tense. Can you feel how fast your heart is beating?” Then guide the child through a deep-breathing exercise and comment on its effects. Initiate a brief group stretching and relaxation exercise between active and quiet routines to help prepare children for more focused exploration.

**Prepare “private” spaces for children.** The sounds of active learning can be loud and, at times, overstimulating. In these and other situations, many children need “private” spaces where they can find a

retreat from group participation. Teachers can make private spaces inviting by including comfortable pillows, blankets, stuffed toys, and a small table for the child who would like to engage in an activity on his own.

**Plan developmentally appropriate transitions.** Transitions can cause a typically positive classroom climate to unravel as activity and intensity levels increase. Teachers can plan transitional activities to maximize focus and encourage constructive participation. Songs, visual prompts, and key phrases in children’s home languages remind children of what is currently occurring, what the child’s responsibility is during the changeover, and what a child can do to help self-regulate through the transition. For example, an adult may lead a group of children in singing a “clean-up song” throughout the time they spend picking up and reshelving toys and materials together. Transitions should be kept to a minimum.

**Play games with rules** periodically to help children learn to focus their attention and regulate their impulses in order to achieve a goal. Small, organized groups are easiest for preschool children to manage. Simple bingo games, matching games, or active games in the play yard such as Red Light, Green Light or Simon Says encourage children to pay close attention and to practice pausing first instead of acting impulsively. Turn-taking in pairs or small groups encourages cooperation. Providing visual cues (e.g., pointing to a picture of a traffic signal or using gestures in coordination with Simon Says), in addition to auditory prompts, helps all children participate in games with success.