Self-Regulation Snap Shot #3: A Focus on Elementary-Aged Children

**Support of self-regulation is critical at each stage of development from birth through young adulthood.**

**Self-regulation is** the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions.

**Self-regulation develops** through interaction with caregivers and the broader environment over an extended period from birth through young adulthood (and beyond).

**Caregivers support self-regulation development** by using three strategies in a process called “co-regulation.” Caregivers include parents, teachers, afterschool care providers, extended family members, and others.

**Self-regulation includes** cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills and processes that support children in coping with strong feelings, controlling impulses, learning, and getting along with others.

**Self-regulation is important** because it promotes wellbeing across the lifespan, including physical, emotional, social and economic health and educational achievement.

This snapshot summarizes key concepts about self-regulation development and intervention for elementary-aged children for practitioners and educators interested in promoting self-regulation for this age group. It is based on a series of four reports on Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress prepared for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). For more information, visit: [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports)

**Self-Regulation Skills Developing in Elementary-Aged Children:**
- Use of self-talk to control behavior
- Cognitive flexibility/problem-solving
- Attentional control/sustained focus
- Increased delay of gratification
- Managing emotion “in the moment”
- Goals and behavior guided by empathy and concern for others
- Organization of behavior to achieve goals
- Completion of larger and more complex tasks

**Self-regulation is influenced by stress and adversity in the environment as well as caregiving supports and children’s own biology, skills, and motivation.**

**Three components of co-regulation for elementary-aged children**

**Build Warm, Responsive Relationships**
- consistent positive regard
- comfort in times of distress
- quick and sensitive response to needs

**Coach Self-Regulation Skills**
- problem-solving
- self-calming
- organization
- planning

**Structure the Environment**
- space to calm down
- task monitoring
- clear expectations
- consistent consequences

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Lessons Learned About Interventions to Promote Self-Regulation in Elementary-Aged Children

Across the lifespan, there are two intervention approaches that support development of self-regulation: skills instruction and co-regulation support. The combination of these approaches is believed to be most effective, regardless of the child’s age. In elementary-aged students, existing interventions utilize these approaches as follows:

- 65% of studies focused on skills instruction alone;
- 9% focused on co-regulation alone;
- 25% combined both;
- 0.1% used other approaches

Based on a review of preventive interventions published between 1989 and 2013, 134 studies with comparison groups were found that targeted self-regulation development for elementary-aged children (ages 5-10 years), with the characteristics described here.

**Strengths:**
- A large number of studies with diverse samples
- A variety of outcomes, particularly direct assessment of child skills

**Limitations:**
- A lack of interventions targeting parents and teachers
- Significant variability in effects exists across interventions

**Conclusions:**
- Broad positive impact seen across many child outcomes
- Targeting parents also has positive outcomes
- Room for enhancement exists with greater involvement of parents and teachers

**Key considerations for promoting self-regulation in elementary-aged children:**
- Encourage a positive school climate for all students
- Deliver self-regulation skills training in at-risk schools
- Train teachers and afterschool staff to teach, model, reinforce, and coach self-regulation skills
- Identify ways to support school and program staff’s own self-regulation capacity
- Provide parent education supports that address co-regulation

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### Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Assessed</th>
<th># Findings</th>
<th>Average Effect Size*</th>
<th>% with Positive Effects*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child Outcomes: Core Self-Regulation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>Small to Medium</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation/Initiative</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child Outcomes: Other Functional Domains</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language/Learning</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delinquent Behavior</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>86%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Small to Medium</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parent Outcomes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-Regulation</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Small to Medium</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting Skills</td>
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<td>Small to Medium</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting Attitudes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Small to Medium</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reported only if findings are based on at least two studies