Self-Regulation Snap Shot #1: A Focus on Infants and Toddlers

Self-Regulation Skills Developing in Infants:
- Shifting attention or averting gaze when overwhelmed
- Self-soothing by sucking fingers or a pacifier

Developing in Toddlers:
- Focusing attention for short periods
- Adjusting behavior to achieve goals
- Briefly delaying gratification
- Beginning to label feelings
- Turning to adults for help with strong feelings

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.

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

This snap shot summarizes key concepts about self-regulation development and intervention for infants and toddlers 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
Lessons Learned About Interventions to Promote Self-Regulation in Infants and Toddlers

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. For infants and toddlers, existing interventions utilize these approaches as follows:

- 0% of studies focused on skills instruction alone;
- 70% focused on co-regulation alone;
- 30% combined both;
- 0% used other approaches

Based on a review of preventive interventions published between 1989 and 2013, 27 studies with comparison groups were found that targeted self-regulation development for infants and toddlers (ages birth through 2 years), with the characteristics described here.

**Strengths:**
- All studies were rigorous randomized controlled trials
- Racially/ethnically diverse samples with a focus on families most in need of support

**Limitations:**
- Relatively small number of studies
- Majority of child outcomes were based on parent report and may reflect changes in parent perceptions, attitudes, or skills rather than changes in child self-regulation

**Conclusions:**
- Broad meaningful effects seen on parenting skills and attitudes may translate into better parent-child relationships and long-term benefits for young children
- Considerable variability in findings suggests need for careful selection of programs
- Room for enhancement exists with greater involvement of parents and teachers

### Outcome Assessed | # Findings | Average Effect Size | % with Positive Effects
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**Child Outcomes: Core Self-Regulation**
Cognitive | 4 | Medium | 100%
Emotional | 8 | Medium | 63%
Behavioral | 22 | Small to Medium | 55%
Stress | 6 | Small to Medium | 83%

**Child Outcomes: Other Functional Domains**
Language/Learning | 4 | Medium to Large | 100%
Interpersonal | 20 | Small to Medium | 65%
Mental Health | 6 | Small | 33%

**Parent Outcomes**
Co-regulation | 12 | Medium | 83%
Parenting Skills | 14 | Medium | 100%
Parenting Attitudes | 10 | Medium | 90%
Parent Mental Health | 9 | Small | 44%

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

**Key considerations for promoting self-regulation in infants and toddlers:**
- Train teachers and child care staff in co-regulation skills, particularly warm interaction, responsivity to child cues, and environmental structure
- Identify ways to support school and child care staff's own self-regulation capacity
- Share self-regulation information, ideas, and classroom approaches with parents/caregivers to support their co-regulation and promote consistency across environments