



## Seven Key Principles of Self-Regulation and Self Regulation in Context

*This brief provides a framework for understanding self-regulation and its development in an ecological-biological development context. It is derived from a [larger report](#) on work conducted by the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy for the Administration for Children and Families.*

Many different terms have been used to describe one's ability to manage emotions and impulses. Figure 1 illustrates self-regulation as an umbrella term that encompasses many constructs that may be used to describe similar skills and processes.

### SEVEN KEY PRINCIPLES OF SELF-REGULATION

- 1. Self-regulation serves as the foundation for lifelong functioning** across a wide range of domains, from mental health and emotional wellbeing to academic achievement, physical health, and socioeconomic success. It has also proven responsive to intervention, making it a powerful target for change.
- 2. Self-regulation is defined from an applied perspective as the act of managing cognition and emotion** to enable goal-directed actions such as organizing behavior, controlling impulses, and solving problems constructively.
- 3. Self-regulation enactment is influenced by a combination of individual and external factors** including biology, skills, motivation, caregiver support, and environmental context. These factors interact with one another to support self-regulation and create opportunities for intervention.



Figure 1

**4. Self-regulation can be strengthened and taught like literacy**, with focused attention, support, and practice opportunities provided across contexts. Skills that are not developed early on can be acquired later, with multiple opportunities for intervention.

**5. Development of self-regulation is dependent on “co-regulation” provided by parents or other caregiving adults** through warm and responsive interactions in which support, coaching, and modeling are provided to facilitate a child’s ability to understand, express, and modulate thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

**6. Self-regulation can be disrupted by prolonged or pronounced stress and adversity including poverty and trauma experiences.** Although manageable stress may build coping skills, stress that overwhelms children’s skills or support can create toxic effects that negatively impact development and produce long-term changes in neurobiology.

**7. Self-regulation develops over an extended period from birth through young adulthood** (and beyond). There are two clear developmental periods where self-regulation skills increase dramatically due to underlying neurobiological changes— early childhood and adolescence – suggesting particular opportunities for intervention.

## UNDERSTANDING SELF-REGULATION IN CONTEXT

Figure 2 presents a comprehensive model of self-regulation enactment which graphically shows the range of factors that influence whether and how well a child or youth may self-regulate in any given situation.

The most internal factor influencing a child’s capacity for self-regulation is comprised of the child’s *biology, genetics, and temperament*, which contribute to individual differences in self-regulation.

The next major influence depicted is the *self-regulation skills* that the child or youth has developed over time, which have often served as a target for interventions. Next is an individual’s *motivation* to self-regulate, which can be derived from either external sources (i.e., rewards and consequences) or internal goals and values (i.e. intrinsic motivation).

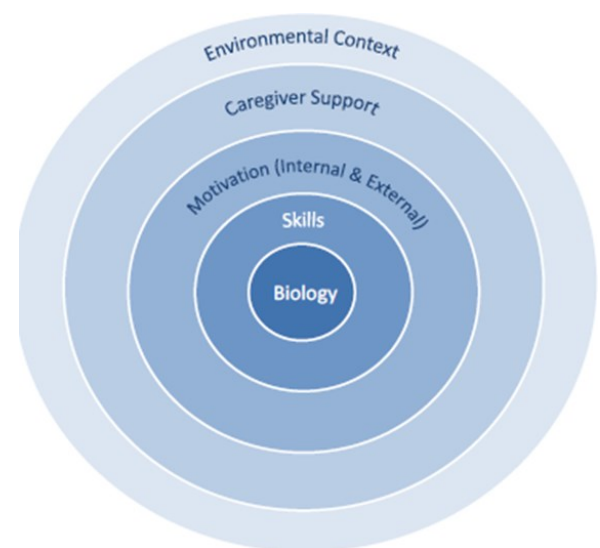


Figure 2

*Caregiver support* (provided by parents, teachers, or mentors) is the next layer in our model, which serves to strengthen children's self-regulation skills and also buffer them from adverse experiences in the larger environment.

The *environmental context* including the demands or stressors placed on children as well as the external resources available also have a significant influence on their ability to self-regulate.

It should be noted that, although the concentric circles in Figure 2 begin with those factors that are most internal and extend outward to those that are most external, each of these factors may interact with and influence the others. For example, environment may influence a child's biology by shaping brain circuitry, and biology or temperament may influence how a caregiver interacts with a child.

## SUMMARY

Self-regulation can be defined from an applied perspective as the act of managing one's thoughts and feelings to engage in goal-directed actions such as organizing behavior, controlling impulses, and solving problems constructively. The act of self-regulating is dependent on several different factors that interact with each other, those that are individual to the child or youth as well as those that are external or environmental, including biology, skills, motivation, caregiver support, and environmental context.

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February 2017

OPRE Report: 2016-39

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Suggested Citation: Murray, D.W., Rosanbalm, K., and Christopoulos, C. (2016). *Self Regulation and Toxic Stress: Seven Key Principles of Self Regulation in Context*. OPRE Report #2016-39. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US. Department of Health and Human Services.

This brief was funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Contract Number HHSP23320095642WC/HHSP23337035T.

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