

Developing Brains- Ideas for Parenting and Education From the New Brain Science

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Self-Regulation: Guidance Strategies

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These ideas for guidance to support self-regulation in children were generated by participants in a workshop on self-regulation at the Early Education and Family Studies Winter Symposium organized by Portland Community College with the support of Oregon AEYC on February 14, 2009. The discussion of self-regulation is by the author.

Note to Reader:

Self-regulation skills provide some of the most critical abilities for children's success in school and life. For a more detailed account self-regulation and its role in school success, see the following article on this site under **Supporting Developing Brains**: *"Self-Regulation and the Developing Brain: One of the essential skills for living and learning."*

Introduction

Supporting self-regulation through guidance and caregiving can be direct (person to person) or indirect (through the environment). These guidance strategies must be both age and individually appropriate for each child.

Martha Bronson, in her comprehensive book, Self-Regulation in Early Childhood: Nature and Nurture, looks at the development and support of self-regulation in children from multiple perspectives. She looks at four domains of development: social/emotional behavior, prosocial behavior, cognitive self-regulation, and motivation for self-regulation. Within each of these domains, she describes the child's milestones of development at each stage as well as the role of adults and the environment in supporting the child's development.

Guidance for Infants

Guidance for infants involves providing warm, responsive, sensitive, and highly individualized care and support. The environment should be interesting and allow the infant to "be the cause" of events. (Bronson 2000,

184) Having a consistent primary caregiver is very important as well as having a predictable environment and routines. Adults should get to know the baby well, so their responses are "fine-tuned" to each individual baby's needs and expectations.

Guidance for Toddlers

Because toddlers are becoming increasingly capable of voluntary control and self-regulation, adults must now be aware of how important it is to model appropriate behavior and responses. Bronson suggests that adults use "responsive" guidance techniques, such as:

- Using language to assist the child in self-control
- Emphasizing the child's own control over their behavior
- Giving the child limited alternatives
- Make suggestions for appropriate behavior rather than stating them as commands
- Always give reasons for why a behavior is not appropriate or safe, "using simple cause-effect reasoning" (2000, 195)

Toddlers can only deal with a few, clearly stated rules for behavior. They need to be aware of the "why" behind each of the rules. Also, when toddlers engage in prosocial acts, these should be recognized and talked about in a way that expresses our value for prosocial behavior.

Environments for toddlers must be interesting, challenging, and safe. Toddlers need choices of activity and materials with places that allow them to play in a relatively uninterrupted way.

Social and Physical Environments for Infants and Toddlers

Martha Bronson sums up the characteristics of the social and physical environments that support self-regulation in the following way:

"Infants need warm, responsive care, environments they can learn to categorize and predict, and experiences of being effective in their social and physical worlds. Toddlers need scope and appropriate challenges for appropriate direction for developing inner control, and caregivers whom they care about and can trust to help them regulate behavior appropriately and develop new strategies and skills." (2000, 197)

Guidance Strategies for Preschool and Kindergarten Children

During the preschool and kindergarten years, children are becoming increasingly capable of self-regulation, but they still need adult guidance and supervision. In terms of guidance strategies for self-regulation, Bronson (2000, 202-207) and others suggest the following:

- Always give reasons for directions and rules for behavior.
- Adult's reactions to problems should be to focus on "problem solving" and looking for more appropriate behaviors.
- Adults must model prosocial responses and self-regulation.
- Adults should use inductive guidance techniques that connect the behavior to the outcome or effects. (If you take all the play dough, no one else can use it.)
- Physical punishments should not be used because they provide modeling of using aggression to solve problems.
- Use redirection (suggest *appropriate* ways or places to do the desired behavior).
- Use positive speech, by telling the child what "to" do, rather than what "not" to do.

A Problem Solving Method

The following are steps that can be taken to solve a problem with some behavior that a child is exhibiting.

- Talk to the child directly
- State the problem or concern and tell why
- Ask the child for their point of view on the concern
- Find agreement on what the problem is & whose problem it is
- Brainstorm some possible solutions that would work and which are acceptable to the adult
- Let the child pick which one to try, if possible
- Implement it-stick to it
- Review progress after you've tried it out

These steps can be used with preschool aged children and up. Modify how you talk to the child based on their age and individual characteristics. This works in preschool classrooms as well as with soccer teams.

Physical Environments

Physical environments should be organized, with centers arranged for different types of activities, and shelves labeled with words and pictures of where materials are stored. Children need opportunities to play undisturbed and for longer periods of time.

Materials should be rotated periodically (books, puzzles, games, props), but basic open-ended materials should be available at all times (blocks, art and writing supplies).

The following are suggestions made by workshop participants regarding direct and indirect guidance to support self-regulation.

- Signs posted at learning centers to say how many children are allowed in the area at once. Shelves labeled with words and pictures to aid clean up.
- Montessori-style play mats for using materials on. Children put away materials before getting out something else.
- Visual cues (pictures) for routines and schedules are posted.
- Activities are used for transition periods:
 - Who is wearing red today?
 - Whose name sounds like?
 - Hold up cards with each child's name.
 - Shine flashlight on each child to dismiss them.
 - Build in rituals.
 - Special songs.
- If children must line up, have something for them to do or sing.
- Have a predictable schedule and predictable routines.
- Involve children in setting the table for snacks and meals, utilizing counting and one-to-one correspondence.
- Involve children in their own self-care.

- Reflect on incidents that happen. Explain it and provide ideas and suggestions.
- Give options or choices of what to do (rather than focusing on what not to do).
- Enforce non-negotiable rules, such as those for safety.
- Build children's self-confidence.
- Establish trust and security.

Resources:

Bodrova, Elena and Deborah J. Leong. Tools of the Mind: The Vygotskian Approach to Early Childhood Education. 2nd Ed. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.

Bronson, Martha B. Self-Regulation in Early Childhood: Nature and Nurture. New York: The Guilford Press, 2000.

Goldberg, Elkhonon. The Executive Brain: Frontal Lobes and the Civilized Mind. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Goleman, Daniel. Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships. New York: Bantam Books, 2006.

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