Learning to control impulsive behavior is the most critical requirement for young children.

As pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs upgrade their instruction in early literacy and numeracy, there is a dawning recognition that many children who are having problems learning to read, write, and work with numbers fail to learn despite the teachers’ best efforts. One of the reasons may be that most early childhood programs focus on outcomes that are narrowly defined in terms of “COSH” (COncepts, Skills, and Habits) and don’t pay enough attention to underlying cognitive and social emotional competencies. “COSHing” preschoolers and kindergartners may yield short-term results but does not seem to translate into sustainable academic achievement. But there is another factor to be considered. The cause of failure to learn academic skills may in fact be due to the children’s lack of self-regulation.

IN BRIEF
Many young children fail to learn because they lack the self-regulation to delay gratification and suppress their impulses. The authors point out some of the reasons for this failure, expose some popular myths regarding self-regulation, and suggest ways that schools can promote self-regulation in early childhood classrooms.
ulation:
Even when teachers cover the appropriate materials in their instruction, many children are not taking it in. They aren’t paying attention, cannot follow directions, or have a hard time remembering what the teacher just told them. Not surprisingly, these are often the same children who have trouble getting along with their classmates. With such unregulated students in their classrooms, teachers end up spending more time on classroom management than on teaching.

What Is Self-regulation?

Self-regulation is a deep, internal mechanism that underlies mindful, intentional, and thoughtful behaviors of children. It is the capacity to control one’s impulses both to stop doing something (even if one wants to continue doing it) and to start doing something (even if one doesn’t want to do it). Self-regulated children can delay gratification and suppress their impulses long enough to think ahead to the possible consequences of their action, or to consider alternative actions that would be more appropriate.

This ability to both inhibit and enact specific responses is a skill used not just in social interactions but in thinking (Blair 2002). In fact, research indicates that these two facets of self-regulation are related: children who cannot control their emotions at age 4 are likely not to be able to follow the teacher’s directions at age 6 and will not become reflective learners in middle and high school.

Myths and Realities

There are a number of myths, shared by many educators and administrators, that translate into practices that stand in the way of classroom instruction that would support children’s development of self-regulation.

Myth: Children are simply immature and will grow out of impulsive behaviors on their own.

Practice: Do nothing and just wait until children become more mature.

Result: Classrooms continue to be chaotic and unmanageable. Children not only fail to learn to self-regulate but end up practicing uncontrollable and impulsive behaviors.

Myth: Children without self-regulation have a medical condition, such as ADHD.

Practice: Identify, diagnose, and medicate the “condition.”
Result: Larger and larger numbers of children are being diagnosed with ADHD at young ages and put on medication even if they might not need it. These children are rarely taught effective strategies that would help them to control themselves.

Myth: Children who lack self-regulation have aggressive personalities that cannot be changed.

Practice: Institute a “three strikes and you’re out” rule.

Result: More and more children are being expelled from preschools and kindergartens. In fact, expulsion rate for some preschools is 15 times higher than the expulsion rate for older students!

Myth: When the teacher is in control, children learn to regulate themselves.

Practice: Teachers turn all activities in preschool and kindergarten into teacher-directed activities and conduct them in large groups.

"To support self-regulation in preschool and kindergarten, teachers need to know how it develops in young children..."

Result: Children are unprepared to engage in self-initiated and independent activities.

Myth: Children come from families that have not taught them to be self-regulated.

Practice: Teachers either blame the parents and do nothing, or attempt to change parenting practices, usually unsuccessfully.

Result: Teachers miss an opportunity to positively affect self-regulation when children are in their classroom.

How Can Schools Support Self-regulation?

To support self-regulation in preschool and kindergarten, teachers need to know how it develops in young children and what is and is not successful in promoting it. In our work with preschool and kindergarten teachers (Bodrova and Leong 2003, 2005), we found that it is possible to positively influence self-regulation even when the amount of time children spend in school is very short. Here are some suggestions that we found helpful in promoting self-regulation in the early childhood classroom:

Instruction in self-regulation should not be reserved only for “problem” children. All young children benefit from practicing deliberate and purposeful behaviors. These can range from following simple rules in movement games (such as “Simon Says”) to following multistep directions necessary to complete an art project.

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When children are constantly regulated by adults, they face a risk of becoming “pseudo-regulated.” To be able to internalize the rules of a certain behavior and to apply them in a new situation, children need to practice the rules in three different contexts. First, they need to follow the rules when regulated by an adult or another child; second, they need to be able to regulate other children in following the rules; and finally, they need to apply the rules to themselves.

Learning to regulate one’s own behavior is in many ways similar to learning other competencies, such as literacy or numeracy. For young children, early stages of learning to read or to count involve the use of hands-on activities and manipulatives. Similarly, the early stages of learning self-regulation involve the use of visual and tangible reminders that help support children’s memory and attention. For example, preschoolers who have trouble waiting for their turn in a large-group discussion will become much more patient when they pass around a pretend microphone, with the understanding that only the child holding the microphone can be “heard.”

Although some manifestations of the lack of self-regulation may look similar to aggressive behavior, these behaviors have different causes and need to be addressed differently. For most young children, aggression is not a premeditated choice but the child’s mindless reaction. Consequently, interventions such as suspensions, anti-bullying programs, and conflict resolution do not work well with young children. This is because these children tend to hit first, then remember what they should have or could have done later, when it is too late. A better way to deal with aggressive behaviors in young children is to teach them to anticipate conflicts before they happen and to plan how they can resolve conflicts if they arise.

The primary context in which preschool and kindergarten children learn self-regulation is make-believe play that is intentional, imaginative, and extended. In such play, children take on different roles, where they first discuss and then act out a pretend scenario, using props in a pretend way. Although four-year-old children are capable of engaging in this kind of complex play, many pre-
school and even kindergarten-age children still play at the toddler level, repeating the same sequence of actions within a very limited repertoire of play themes and roles.

In addressing gaps in the knowledge and skills of young children, we must also address the development of self-regulation as the underlying skill that makes learning possible. Early childhood programs present an important opportunity to influence self-regulation in young children. Thus, instruction in self-regulation in early years deserves the same—if not more—attention as instruction in academic subjects.

**References**


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