FYSB | Family & Youth Services Bureau

Adolescent Self-Regulation

August 2023

TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

- Cultivate your own self-regulation.

- Ensure teaching strategies and practices affirm the diverse range of culturally based ways of being.

- Support youth through co-regulation.

- Provide a warm and responsive relationship.

- Structure the learning environment to make self-regulation manageable.

- Teach self-regulation through modeling, practice, and reflection.

- Support student autonomy.

- Embed self-regulatory practices into everyday activities.

WHAT IS SELF-REGULATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Self-regulation is defined as "the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions such as organizing behavior, controlling impulses, and solving problems constructively" (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017). Self-regulation can be broken down into the following three overlapping domains:

- **Cognitive self-regulation** includes focused attention, executive functioning, goal setting, self-monitoring, problem-solving, perspective-taking, and decision-making.

- **Emotional self-regulation** involves actively managing strong feelings and emotionally arousing situations as well as expressing emotions effectively in a calm and non-disruptive way.

- **Behavioral self-regulation** includes following rules, delaying gratification, persistence, impulse control, conflict resolution, active coping strategies, and goal-oriented behaviors (Murray et al., 2015).

Self-regulation is closely related to the social-emotional learning (SEL) core competencies of *self-awareness* ⃗ (i.e., the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior) and *self-management* ⃗ (i.e., the ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations) (CASEL, n.d.).

Self-regulation is foundational for positive health and functioning across the lifespan, including physical health, mental and emotional health, social relationships, academic achievement, and socio-economic success (Pandey et al., 2018). It also can be learned over time, making it a powerful focus for intervention (Murray et al., 2015). By promoting self-regulation as a key component of health education, educators can help youth achieve positive outcomes in all areas of their lives.

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-REGULATION?

Self-regulation develops over time, starting in infancy and continuing through adulthood, through a complex interaction of biological, individual, relational, and environmental factors (Murray et al., 2015).

Biological factors (e.g., genetics, temperament, and brain maturation) can influence the development of self-regulation. During adolescence, the pre-frontal cortex, which supports executive functioning and emotional regulation, is under development, leaving adolescents prone to emotionally driven motivations. This presents both a susceptibility to environmental influences and an opportunity for intervention.

Individual factors affecting the development of self-regulation include self-regulatory skills, self-efficacy, feelings of competence, and intrinsic motivation to self-regulate to achieve their goals and live their values.

Relationships with caregivers, caring adults, and peers all affect the development of self-regulation. In general, supportive and responsive relationships promote better self-regulation. However, the association is bi-directional. For example, the quality of a child's relationships affects their ability to self-regulate, and a child's ability to self-regulate also affects the quality of their relationships. The importance of these different relationships also changes as adolescents age. Peers, for example, have a greater influence into adolescence (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014).

Environmental factors such as the availability of supports and resources within the school or community (e.g., safe places to play, access to libraries and other activities) positively influence self-regulation development, whereas stressors and adversities (e.g., lack of safety, poor climate, high teacher turnover, community violence) can have the opposite effect.

For both children and adults, our capacity for self-regulation is diminished when under chronic or toxic stress. Prolonged exposure to toxic stress and adversity in childhood and adolescence can negatively impact regions of the developing brain essential for developing self-regulation. Caregivers and other trusted adults play a critical role in strengthening youth's self-regulatory skills and buffering them from the harmful effects of stress and adversity (Murray et al., 2015).

IS SELF-REGULATION RELATED TO SEXUAL HEALTH?

Evidence suggests self-regulation is associated with adolescent romantic relationship quality and sexual health behaviors. Adolescents who are better self-regulators are more likely to talk with their parents/caregivers about sensitive sexual health topics (Shuster et al., 2021) and report they have and can maintain better quality romantic relationships (e.g., keep promises, sensitive to the others' feelings, satisfied in the relationship, resolve conflict) (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014). There are few studies examining the role of self-regulation specific to sexual behavior; however, research suggests self-regulation is necessary for goal setting and goal pursuit, which may foster positive outcomes across a variety of contexts (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Two studies have shown self-regulation in adolescence is negatively associated with sexual risk-taking (i.e., better self-regulators take fewer sexual risks) (Crocket et al., 2006; Raffaelli & Crocket, 2003). One of these showed self-regulation at age 12–13 years was not associated with ever having sex or sexual initiation 4 years later, but once youth were sexually active, better self-regulators had fewer sexual partners and trended towards more condom use (Raffaelli & Crocket, 2003). Another study found teaching emotional regulation strategies delayed sexual initiation among adolescents with mental health symptoms (Houck et al., 2016).
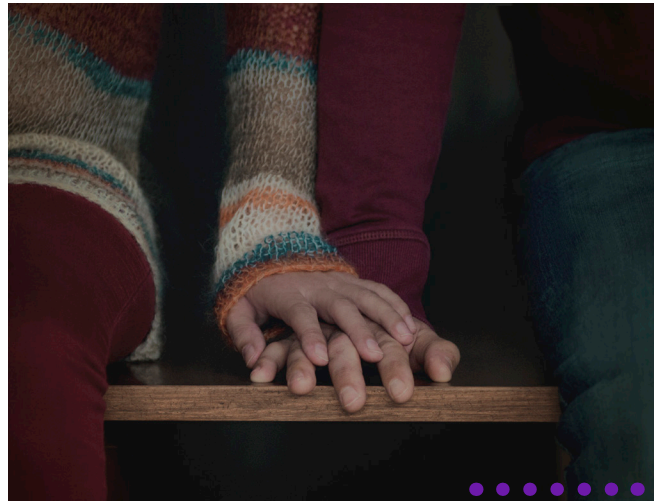
HOW DO ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY PREVENTION PROGRAMS ADDRESS SELF-REGULATION?

Most adolescent pregnancy prevention programs focus on the development of *cognitive self-regulation skills*, such as how to:

- **Set goals for the future** and consider how sex, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections can influence those goals.
- **Develop problem-solving skills** to understand how to act when faced with obstacles or important decisions about relationships or sex.
- **Make decisions** about one's health, one's relationships, delaying sex, or using contraceptives.

Increasingly, adolescent pregnancy prevention programs teach youth how to develop *emotional regulation skills*, including how to:

- **Identify emotions and share feelings with another person** (e.g., using "I feel" statements).
- **Recognize situations or triggers with the potential to elevate one's emotional state**, like being with friends or experiencing a trauma trigger or reminder.
- **Recognize how strong emotions influence thoughts and behaviors**, including sexual behaviors.
- **Manage strong emotions** through techniques such as self-talk, breathing, mindfulness, movement, and muscle relaxation.

Some adolescent pregnancy prevention programs teach some aspects of *behavioral self-regulation*, including how to:

- **Identify strategies for delaying gratification** of an immediate reward, such as practicing refusal skills for delaying sex.

- **Identify strategies for controlling impulses**, such as choosing to avoid people and places encouraging sexual risk-taking or modifying situations to avoid risk (e.g., going to the restroom or calling a friend to step away from an unwanted situation, avoiding drugs and alcohol).

- **Identify strategies for focusing on more goal-oriented behaviors**, such as spending time with peers who have similar values and focusing on academics or extracurricular activities.

## HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-REGULATION?

You can help support the development of self-regulation in youth by teaching self-regulation skills through your adolescent pregnancy prevention curriculum or adulthood preparation subject activities. The Resources section on this tip sheet includes several noteworthy resources providing interventions, lessons, and tips for teaching these skills.

Teaching young people to develop self-regulation depends not only on *what* is taught but also *how* something is taught. Adult caregivers, including parents, educators, coaches, and other mentors, play a critical role in shaping self-regulation through an interactive process called co-regulation. Co-regulation is the supportive process by which one person uses their own regulated state to help another person reach a regulated state. Caring adults can offer co-regulation by providing a warm and responsive relationship and a structured learning environment and by teaching and coaching self-regulation skills (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Students are more likely to engage in self-regulated learning if their learning environment fosters a sense of autonomy, connection, and competency. On the other hand, learning environments characterized by high pressure and control thwart self-regulated learning (Opdenakker, 2022).

How to Co-Regulate

Provide Warm, Responsive Relationship

Structure the Environment

Teach/Coach Self-Regulation Skills

It is always important to ensure teaching strategies and practices affirm the diverse range of culturally based ways of being. Programs and lessons promoting self-regulation can be misused as a tool for controlling youth behavior rather than as a strategy for promoting their well-being and growth. Rigid norms around managing and regulating emotions and behavior, including determining which expressions of emotions are preferred and which behaviors are acceptable (e.g., be quiet and contained, be still, follow directions in a lock-step manner) can cause harm (Simmons, 2019).
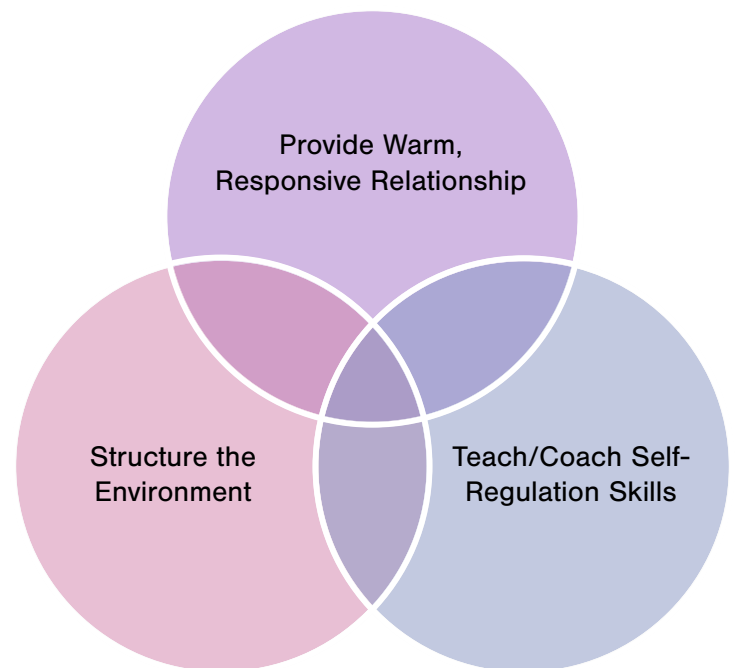
Below are some tips and specific strategies for supporting adolescents to develop self-regulation.

Cultivate your own self-regulation, particularly in times of stress.	• Pay attention to your own feelings and reactions during times of stress or during stressful interactions with youth. • Pay attention to your own thoughts and beliefs about the behaviors of others, particularly youth. • Use strategies (e.g., breath, tactile grounding, water break) to manage emotions and respond effectively and compassionately in stressful situations.
Ensure teaching strategies and practices affirm the diverse range of culturally based ways of being.	• Examine whether dominant narratives for behavioral expectations align with the identities, needs, and culturally based ways of being of your students. • Examine your own cultural biases around behavioral expectations. • Always teach self-regulation as a tool to promote growth and development, not as a tool to control student behavior or promote compliance. • Use a variety of teaching strategies, examples, and practices connecting to students' lives and experiences (e.g., drumming, music, movement, sensory activities, and mindfulness).
Provide a warm and responsive relationship.	• Communicate, through words and action, interest in their world. • Stay attuned to the needs of youth: recognize and respond to subtle cues and signals they provide in times of distress (e.g., shaking their leg, staring out the window, lowering their head). • Work toward >5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions (Cook et al., 2017).
Structure the learning environment.	• Create a physically, socially, and emotionally safe environment for youth to learn and explore without risk to their well-being. • Provide consistent, predictable routines and expectations, including behavioral expectations and consequences.
Teach self-regulation.	• Teach, model, and coach self-regulation skills (e.g., goal setting, problem-solving, stress management). • Provide opportunities for practice, along with opportunities for reflection. • Use positive reinforcement (i.e., praise and support) to encourage desired behaviors. • Refer to the OPRE Resource for effective strategies by age group.
Support student autonomy.	• Take students' perspectives into account and acknowledge their feelings and perceptions. • Offer choices for how to meaningfully engage. • Provide students with autonomy to make decisions about their own learning with scaffolding and support—they will be more likely to persist in the face of challenges.
Embed self-regulatory practices into everyday activities.	• Build sensory/brain breaks into daily routines. • Engage in regular opportunities for reflection. • Identify and label emotions—by helping to put words to feelings, you can help others better understand and manage their emotions.

RESOURCES

[Building Staff Co-Regulation to Support Healthy Relationships in Youth](#)
A Guide for Practitioners: This guide helps programs integrate the science of self-regulation development into existing services through co-regulation.

[Creating Safe Spaces: A Facilitator's Guide to Trauma-Informed Programming for Youth in Optimal Health Programs](#)
This guide is for facilitators who work directly with youth and is intended to complement other activities, policies, and procedures to support using a trauma-informed approach.

[Dynamic Mindfulness: Calm Focused Engagement in your Life and Classroom](#)
The Dynamic Mindfulness, or DMind, curriculum provides students and teachers with tools for stress management, self-awareness, and self-regulation. The Niroga Institute website includes online training and downloadable lessons.

[Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series](#)
This webpage provides a series of interrelated reports titled *Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress* from a team at the Center for Child and Social Policy at Duke University, including a comprehensive review of self-regulation interventions for children and adolescents from birth to young adulthood.

[The CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs](#)
The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Guide gives a systematic framework for evaluating the quality of social and emotional programs and applies this framework to identify and rate well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs with the potential for broad dissemination to schools across the United States.

[Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents: How to Foster Resilience through Attachment, Self-Regulation, and Competency](#)
This book by Margaret Blaustein and Kristine Kinniburgh is a comprehensive guide for working with children and adolescents impacted by toxic stress and trauma. They have dedicated an entire section to developing self-regulation, including practical tips, strategies, and handouts for working with youth.

[Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning](#)
Dena Simmons is an activist, educator, and founder of LiberatED, a collective focused on developing school-based resources at the intersection of SEL, racial justice, and healing. This article calls upon courageous educators to examine SEL through a racial justice lens and infuse SEL opportunities with the sociopolitical context.

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