

## **TIP SHEET**

# Promoting Personal Responsibility in Youth Programs

June 2021

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research on self-regulation (Murray et al., 2016) is relevant to practitioners of Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) programs. This fact sheet provides hands-on application for promoting personal responsibility in youth programs. First, we define self-regulation. Next, we provide skill-building activities that SRAE programs can use to promote personal responsibility. Supporting the formulation of emotions and brain-based learning strategies fosters healthy decision-making and executive function. Encouraging goal-directed actions builds internal motivation.

## **SELF-REGULATION AND DECISION-MAKING**

"Self-regulation... is managing cognition and emotion to enable goal-directed actions such as organizing behavior, controlling impulses, and solving problems constructively" (Murray et al., 2016). Self-regulation is the opposite of emotional manipulation (Web MD, 2020). Individual [factors](#) influence the development of either self-regulated or manipulative behavioral patterns. All of us have used manipulative tactics. Youth resort to manipulative tactics when they feel powerless and lack the communication skills to get what they need. Passive-aggressive behaviors and

moodiness may be attempts to avoid or cope with difficult situations. Justifying behaviors associated with poor time management skills to avoid personal responsibility for choices is common (e.g., "I could not get my homework done because I was busy building my science project"). Environmental [factors](#) also influence decision-making (Inanc et al., 2020). According to the CDC (2021), potentially traumatic events that occur in a child's life from the ages of 0–17 have negative effects on future safety, health, and stability. Events including witnessing violence in the home or community and experiencing significant loss such as the death of a family member impact future health and well-being. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) increase toxic stress and impulsiveness. High ACE scores require youth programs to support the development of self-regulation strategies (CDC, 2021).



## **GOAL SETTING AND FUTURE PLANNING**

Brain-based strategies build strong neurological connections and enhance learning (Jensen, 2005). The first brain-friendly strategy is storytelling. Compelling storytelling develops self-regulation by helping young people categorize feelings and provides models to which they can aspire. Quality literature is rich with metaphorical language—describing an object or action by stating how

it is like something else—which helps youth build internal connections and understanding. These neuropathways are essentially electrical conduits that create roads and bridges of understanding in the mind of an adolescent. Neuropsychological research has documented the benefits of using emotion-rich metaphors to support, practice, and model self-regulation skills. Dr. Modell (2009) describes metaphors as “the currency of the mind” (p. 6). They assist with decision-making, goal setting, and future planning because they activate cognitive processes in the limbic system to transfer meaning between domains and store memories of similarities and differences (Modell, 2005, 2009).

So, when SRAE programs want to teach the difference between love and infatuation, for instance, the use of metaphors enhances learning by building a strong neurological connection. For example, consider Victor Frankl’s vivid description of his wife in *The Art of Loving Well*, which exhibits an image of mature love that inspires youth to strive for this ideal when he says, “Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death” (Frankl, 1993, p. 313).

Compare it to Elizabeth Enright’s description of a summer fling in *A Distant Bell*, as the main character reflects on the relationship saying, “We were nothing to each other but a means of killing time” (Enright, 1993, p. 94). Again, contrast the early positive relationship feelings described by Maureen Daly in *Sixteen*: “the moon tinsel the twigs and silver-plated the snowdrifts” and “the stars winked down like a million flirting eyes” to the later hurtful feelings from the relationship gone wrong described in “the stars were little hard chips of light far up in the sky, and the moon stared down with a sullen yellow glare” (Daly, 1993, p. 129).

### Practical ways for SRAE programs to use metaphors with youth:



Journal writing using metaphors to describe their relationship experiences and then perhaps sharing within small groups



Coordinating a photo scavenger hunt using metaphors to describe their relationship experiences and then perhaps sharing as a collage within small groups



Using quality adolescent literature that has metaphorical descriptions of early relationship experiences



Comparing and contrasting love songs from the past and present



Listening to life experiences from guest speakers who use metaphorical language



Partnering with existing social and emotional learning classes within schools

## HOW SRAE PROGRAMS PROMOTE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH FAMILIES

SRAE programs engage with families throughout the year, and the following strategies could be covered during parent/caregiver education workshops, newsletters, and social media messaging. These efforts can encourage parents and caregivers to take advantage of day-to-day unstructured and structured co-regulation opportunities. The most effective strategies are “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" (Murray et al., 2016). The following could be shared during family education workshops.

**Use an emotion chart.** Mealtime and bedtime provide the opportunity for families to engage in a warm and nurturing manner and talk about the events and experiences of the day. Encourage parents and caregivers to model how they responded to the emotions of the day by using emotion regulation charts



(available for free online). For example, the parent could start by saying, "My boss criticized my work today in front of my coworkers, and I felt embarrassed." Identify the emotion, then use a growth process to turn the negative experience into a positive one. For example, "Tomorrow I will request a meeting with my boss, let him know how my work has improved, and request that in the future I would like to receive feedback in a one-on-one setting rather than in front of my coworkers."

**Reframe past experiences.** Encourage families to teach their children to reframe past negative or dissatisfying experiences. These experiences should be used like a rear-view mirror and GPS when driving a car. The rear-view mirror is for an occasional glance back to remember where we've been. But focusing too much on what's behind makes it more likely to miss the opportunities ahead. Instead, provide parents skill-building strategies that teach youth to concentrate on rerouting the next experience away from past roadblocks toward future goals. Planning a breakout session for parents called "Conversation Starters"

incorporates easy-to-implement strategies for dinnertime and bedtime.

### Conversation starters for parents:

- Name an emotion you experienced today.
- How do you think you could handle that differently in the future?
- Let's practice together what you can say next time.

**Enforce natural consequences.** Plan a breakout session that assists parents in avoiding being the "helicopter parent." The goal of this parent workshop is to support parents/caregivers in understanding the importance of allowing young adolescents to experience the natural consequences of their choices (Cline & Fay, 2020). Personal responsibility is best taught when the stakes are low during early adolescence (e.g., missing lunch because their lunch bag was left at home) rather than when the stakes are high (e.g., drinking and driving).

### Suggestions for parents to enforce natural consequences:

- Only give consequences they can realistically enforce
- Always follow through with stated consequences
- Provide tasks for youth to do at home, with appropriate consequences for not following through
- Ask youth to describe how their behavior impacted the family
- Reward youth for character and effort rather than grades



### Model repair strategies.

SRAE program facilitators should model repair strategies. These opportunities happen between youth participants

during classroom presentations, transitions between activities, and team-building activities. Modeling repair strategies when we get angry and say something we shouldn't teaches youth critical self-regulation skills. When we make mistakes, we need to take responsibility for those mistakes.

### Suggested repair strategies for SRAE programs:

- Make it a game to "rewind" or humorously pretend to move backward like a video on rewind, backtracking the previous steps, and replaying the situation with a more appropriate response
- Request and expect youth to apologize for forgetting to respond appropriately and then restate their comment appropriately
- Ask those hurt for forgiveness

## SUMMARY

This brief has provided practical tips that SRAE programs can use with adolescent participants and their families. Building self-regulation skills requires intentionality and quality program planning. For more information, contact:

[SRAE-TTA@publicstrategies.com](mailto:SRAE-TTA@publicstrategies.com).

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## Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program

## Additional Resources

**Adverse Childhood Experiences** – Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have a tremendous impact on future violence, victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity of individuals. Working together, we can help create neighborhoods, communities, and a world in which every child can thrive. This CDC site offers resources to learn more about preventing ACEs in your community by assuring safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

**Conceptual Models to Depict the Factors that Influence the Avoidance and Cessation of Sexual Risk Behaviors Among Youth** – This brief was developed as part of a portfolio of youth-focused projects on sexual risk avoidance and cessation sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The brief presents two initial, complementary conceptual models—one for sexual risk avoidance and a second for sexual risk cessation—that aim to guide efforts to prevent youth risk behaviors and promote optimal health.

**50 Great Feelings Charts** (for kids and adults). Emotion charts can help identify how a person is feeling. The feeling chart or wheel is a printable tool to help someone open up about their feelings, ask questions, or express concerns.

**The Adolescent Brain: Understanding Behavior** – This presentation, part of the series of *Schools in Mind* expert advice videos, explains the changes happening within the adolescent brain during development and how those changes can impact behavior.