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Learning self regulation is an important set of skills that all children need to develop in order to grow into happy and successful adults. So why is it hard for some children, and how can we help them? Almost everyone could say that they have seen a child in the midst of a tantrum. Often these outbursts can happen at the most inopportune times such as whilst waiting in line at the supermarket or during a family get-together. A child's tantrum can leave a parent feeling embarrassed and defeated but it is important to look deeper than the child's behaviour and consider what is underlying the unpleasant outburst. Young children take time to develop the skills they need to effectively self-regulate their emotions. Knowing how to support your child through strong emotions and help them development. Children need to learn to self regulate their emotions for healthy social/emotional development Selfregulation refers to a person's ability to understand and manage their behaviour and reactions to the feelings they are experiencing something exciting or upsetting and being able to behave in socially appropriate ways. Self-regulation skills are especially important when reacting to strong emotions such as anger, embarrassment or frustration. Without being able to self-regulate, a person is at risk of letting their emotions significantly impact on their behaviour. For children, learning to self regulate is important as they become more independent and begin to make decisions about their behaviour and how they will manage situations without guidance from an adult. Being able to self regulate also has the following benefits for children: Helps them to make and keep friends. Is beneficial for their mental health. For some more detailed information about self regulation, visit the following site: How to Support Self-Regulation Difficulties in Children - Foothills Academy Children develop self-regulation skills through secure and responsive relationships with their parents or caregivers. Self-regulation begins to develop from infancy but really kicks in during the toddler and preschool years. The best way to teach children self-regulation skills is by positive role modelling. Children learn much about self-regulate is by modelling it themselves. If a parent has difficulty controlling their own emotions and behaves in ways that are negative or destructive, it is likely that the child will learn to express their own feelings in a similar way. For example, if an adult expresses their anger by yelling, screaming and throwing things - the child will learn that this is an appropriate way to express and vent their own frustrations. Young children can experience very big emotions that can be hard to process - and these can even be scary for them. Feelings such as anger, anxiousness and frustration are triggering for a child and can lead to them having a meltdown or tantrum. When this does occur, it is important to know that enforcing punishments for these behaviours won't help the child learn the skills they need to calm down, cope and adapt to the feelings they are experiencing. For some helpful suggestions on dealing with meltdowns and tantrums, check out the following website: Tantrums why a child might have difficulties self-regulating - from particular personality-types to developmental disorders such as Global Development Delay, or experiences of trauma. In many cases, as a child grows older they pair more skills in terms of self-regulation - particularly when they have positive role models in their lives who can help them process those hard feelings and then respond to them more appropriately. If your child is having ongoing difficulties with self-regulation it may be best to consult a professional such as a psychologist or paediatrician For children who have medical conditions, disabilities or developmental problems or a trauma background, the services of a medical or health care professional might be required to determine the best possible strategies for helping a child grow their self-regulation skills. A paediatrician is always a good starting point so if you are concerned about your child's lack of self-regulation skills, consider booking an appointment with your local paediatrician. For adults, it is important to recognise and understand that we all have choices in terms of how we react to situations. In any circumstance, there are three options we might choose to act upon - either approaching, avoiding or attacking the problem. Whilst our feelings might certainly affect which approach we tend to lean towards, it is important to understand that we have a choice in relation to which option we pursue. By focusing on our values and beliefs instead of focusing entirely on our emotions, we are able to make better decisions in terms of how we respond - and herein lies effective in supporting emotional-regulation. For adults, practicing mindfulness can have a significantly positive impact. Engaging in practices such as focused breathing, meditation and mindfulness will help put some space in between what is happening in our lives and our reactions. This allows for some conscious thinking so that a person is able to respond rather than react and therefore exhibit greater self-control. For some simple mindfulness exercises, visit the following website: 1-Minute Mindfulness Exercises (psychcentral.com) There are many other techniques that individuals might choose to use to help them regulate their emotions. Engaging in exercise, taking a 5 minute 'time out' for yourself or journaling are all simple yet effective strategies that many choose to use to help them regulate their emotions in a healthy and appropriate way. We can see the beginnings of self-regulation in very young babies. A baby who sucks on their fingers whilst waiting to be fed is comforting themselves. Babies can also be observed avoiding eye-contact if they are feeling over-stimulated and need a break from the attention whilst objects such as a dummy or special blanket can become useful tools in supporting early self-regulation development. As a toddler or child grows older, they will learn more strategies for self-regulation that align with socially accepted behaviours. Learning how to speak quietly whilst at the movies, recognising the body indicators for needing the toilet, especially when at the early stages of toilet training, and learning how to turn-take and negotiate with others all require self-regulation skills. Most children will continue to develop these skills as they progress through the teenage years and being exposed to adults who are able to self-regulate their own emotions will certainly have a very positive impact. Children learn what they see - and this is why it is so important that we, as adults, display positive strategies for regulating our own emotions. The best way you can help your kids learn to regulate their emotions is by practicing self-regulation yourself. Displaying patience, calm and kindness will help your child see that it is possible to self-regulate through difficult circumstances. For children and teens, they often need both time and support to learn and practice self-regulation effectively. Offering empathy and validating the child's feelings is important and then within a secure relationship, the adult can support the child to use calming strategies and gain control of their emotions. Over time and with practice this will get easier but here are a few suggestions for supporting self-regulation in children: Children will develop self-regulation techniques from as early as birth but they all develop at different stages - Have realistic expectations of your child based upon their age and stage of development. -Stay calm and model self-regulation -Provide support and encouragement for the child - Be empathetic and acknowledge the child's feelings - Remove any unnecessary demands to reduce stress for the child - Provide structure and consistency in your responses to children. Be consistent with rules and expectations. -Expand your child's vocabulary to help them effectively talk about their feelings. - Help the child develop some strategies for coping when they are dysregulated eg. Taking a break, positive affirmations, asking for help etc. - Teach children about their brain and help them understand how stress affects them - Use positive reinforcement and praise to celebrate successes in self-Avoid punishing a child for dysregulated behaviour and instead focus on the skills they need to grow to effectively self-regulation strategies, visit the following website: BeYou - Self Regulation. It is so important that children develop self-regulation regulation – skills as this will have a direct impact on their overall happiness and success in life. Children who are able to effectively and appropriately deal with stress, disappointment, frustration and anger are far more likely to do well in school and develop positive relationships with others. from infancy will truly give them a great start in life. Self-regulation is a foundational life skill—one that profoundly influences a child's emotional health, learning capacity, and relationships. For parents, navigating daily meltdowns, impulsivity, or mood swings can feel overwhelming. These moments often test patience and resilience, yet they also highlight opportunities to support a child's long-term development. Research in developmental psychology underscores that emotional regulation and impulse control-continues to mature well into young adulthood, In the meantime, children rely heavily on adults for co-regulation: the process of calming and organizing emotions with support. While parenting in these moments is rarely easy, fostering self-regulation in children is a powerful and valuable investment in their well-being. It equips them to cope with stress, resolve conflicts constructively, and thrive socially and academically. Below are 10 evidence-informed strategies that can help.10 Self-Regulation Strategies that can help.10 Self-Regulations) Breathing techniques activates the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), helping to modulate stress. Various breathing techniques, including 4-7-8 breathing and diaphragmatic breathing (or belly breathing), can be encouraged to help the body shift out of the stress mode (sympathetic nervous system dominance) and into the body's rest, digest and restore mode (parasympathetic nervous system dominance). Breathing through the diaphragmatic breathing (or belly breathing), can be encouraged to help the body shift out of the stress mode (sympathetic nervous system dominance) and into the body's rest, digest and restore mode (parasympathetic nervous system dominance). supports more efficient breathing. Encouraging your child to take a deep breath through their diaphragm for four seconds, hold it for seven seconds, and exhale for slightly longer, at eight seconds - further promotes PNS activation. Having children place their hand on their stomach can be a good cue to see if they are breathing through their diaphragm, as their stomach should be expanding with each breath. Over time, these breathing techniques will become easier and more ingrained into the child or adolescent's nervous system, supporting neuroplasticity and nervous system. down corner is a dedicated, sensory-friendly space where children can retreat when they feel dysregulated. Stocking this area with soft seating, fidget tools, calming visuals and soothing music is recommended. The goal is not isolation or punishment, but self-directed regulation. If a child or teen is feeling dysregulated, reminding them that this area is available to them can help them to have a safe space to self-regulate. If your family has a beloved pet your child is close to, encourage them to spend time with them in this sacred space. Research highlights the value pets can serve in terms of co-regulation support for our nervous system. If you don't have a family pet, giving your child a hug can also provide emotional comfort. You know your child best, so assess when it may be the most beneficial to utilize this space. Emotional Labeling, or identifying emotions, helps children and teens acknowledge, validate, and process what they're feeling. Encourage your child to name what they are feeling, with compassion and curiosity. Use validating statements, such as "It's okay to feel mad," or "You seem frustrated—do you want to talk or take space?" Model acceptance and self-awareness. Neuroscience suggests that labeling emotions activates the prefrontal cortex and reduces amygdala activity, which in turn can decrease emotional reactivity. Body Awareness and Mindfulness Mindfulness, non-judgmental present moment awareness, cultivates a regulated nervous system. Encouraging your child to bring awareness to their own needs and take care of themselves. There are several ways to do this: Being aware that their body and brain are in stress mode. Engage in a task that helps them to self-soothe, like taking deep breaths (as noted above). Use yoga poses or gentle stretching to promote improved interoception, the ability to sense internal body signals which is essential for regulation. Encouraging your child or teen to be aware of how their body feels, such as when they might be hungry, thirsty, tired, or antsy, can support improved mind-body attunement. This encourages them to attend to their own dynamic and individual needs. Visual Supports, including an emotional thermometer, can help children and teens recognize when they should use self-soothing or coping skills. You can modify these kinds of support for your child. Questions to ask include: What is true for them when they begin to feel intensity? Nutrition & Rest as Regulatory oolsEating a well-balanced, diverse and nutrient-dense diet is also important for supporting nervous system health. Both macro and micronutrients support balance and calm. Ensuring your child is getting enough sleep is also essential for mood and nervous system regulation, as is ade hydration. Nature as a Regulation Tool While it may seem simple, getting sufficient time outdoors in the sun and in nature is also significant in supporting nervous system modulation and mood. Sunshine is important for regulating mood and stress, as it helps to support circadian rhythm balance, which helps to modulate the body's systems, including the nervous system. Adequate sunlight also supports Vitamin D, helping to support Serotonin. Furthermore, time in nature, simply surrounded by trees and plants, can help to reduce stress (cortisol) hormones. Children and teens can also implement mindfulness while being engaged in nature, further supporting self-regulation. Movement as a Regulation Tool Utilizing movement—including play, hula hoop, dance or sports—is a great tool for regulating mood and supporting overall health, including that of the nervous system. Encouraging your child to engage in forms of movement that feel soothing or stress-relieving to them is key. Movement can help to reset the nervous system, while releasing endorphins—all factors that support regulation. Running and physical exercise, in particular, have noteworthy benefits for supporting stress. \*Meditation may seem boring or daunting, there is a lot of encouraging research to back this practice up, including reductions in cortisol, heart rate and inflammation as evidenced in a recent meta-analysis published in The Journal of Psychiatric Research. Meditative scripts and guided visual imagery can be excellent choices for many children and teens, calming meditative music, such as sound healing, nature sounds or simply slow, soothing, peaceful music, can also confer benefits. If your child is new to meditating, encourage the practice for 5 minutes and then work your way up. Better yet, meditate alongside your child. Modeling Self-Regulation as Parents & Using Positive ReinforcementChildren learn through observation Demonstrate your own strategies aloud: "I'm feeling overwhelmed, so I'm going to take a break and breathe." By acknowledging how you're feeling and modeling helps normalize difficult emotions. This transparency fosters for the self-soothing, you can help reinforce how your child can engage in similar behaviors. Modeling helps normalize difficult emotions. This transparency fosters for the self-soothing, you can help reinforce how you're feeling and modeling helps normalize difficult emotions. This transparency fosters for the self-soothing, you can help reinforce how you're feeling and modeling helps normalize difficult emotions. psychological safety and strengthens the co-regulation dynamic. Use positive reinforcement and praise their efforts. Here's an example: "I noticed you took a few moments when you were upset before to reset and focus on your breathing, I'm really proud of you." This helps your child be encouraged and seen for their work. When to Seek Professiona SupportWant personalized support? Handspring's licensed child therapists can help you implement these strategies at home. Book a free intake consultation today. Visit handspringhealth.com for more info.FAQs About Self-Regulation Strategies for KidsQ1: How do self-regulation skills develop in children?Self-regulation is closely tied to brain development, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which governs executive functions like impulse control and decision-making. In early children calm and organize their emotions. As children mature, especially internalize these skills with scaffolding and consistent modeling.Q2: What are signs my child may be struggling with self-regulation?Signs vary by age. Frequent tantrums beyond developmental norms or inability to recognize oncern. In older children, persistent difficulty with transitions, verbal or physical aggression, or an inability to recognize oncern. emotional cues may suggest underlying regulation challenges.Q3: How do I adapt these strategies for different age groups?Younger children benefit most from co-regulation—think modeling calm behavior, offering comfort, and labeling emotions for them and begin using tools more independently and engage in reflective conversations about their emotions.Q4: What if my child has ADHD, autism, or sensory processing issues? These strategies are still highly relevant but often need to be more structured, repetitive, and sensory-informed. For example, children with ADHD may benefit from more frequent movement breaks, while autistic children may need predictable visuals and sensory accommodations. Occupational therapists can be valuable partners in customizing these supports. Alloway, T. P., & Gathercole, S. E. (2008). Working Memory Rating Scale (WMRS): Manual. 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Yap, M. B., Allen, N. B., & Sheeber, L. (2007). Using an emotion regulation framework to understand the role of temperament and family Psychology Review, 10(2), 180-196. Article PubMed Google Scholar Zelazo, P. D. (2006). The dimensional change card sort (DCCS) A method of assessing executive function in children. Nature Protocols, 1(1), 297. Article PubMed Google Scholar Zhou, Q., Chen, S. H., & Main, A. (2012). Commonalities and differences in the research on children's effortful control and executive function: A call for an integrated model of self-regulation. Child Development Perspectives, 6(2), 112-121.Article Google Scholar Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Attaining self-regulation: A social cognitive perspective. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), Handbook of self-regulation (pp. 13-39). San Diego, CA: Academic Press. Chapter Google Scholar This blog was originally published on June 1, 2021, and was updated on November 5, 2024, with new information. Self-regulation is one of the most important areas of skill development for children in the first five years of life. If we want our children in self-regulation skills. Let's take a closer look at the importance of selfregulation in child development and early learning. We'll explore the definition and components of self-regulation, how self-regulation is developed and observed in child care providers can promote self-regulation is developed and observed in child care providers can promote self-regulation. feelings and behaviors in a way that enables goal-directed actions. Self-regulation takes years to develop, and children often depend on their caregivers to help them manage their emotions and behavior, according to the Nebraska Extension. Self-regulation is sometimes understood as a single skill, but it may also be useful to break it down further into clusters of skills that include: Executive Function: A set of mental skills and habits for dealing with big or uncomfortable feelings like anger, frustration, excitement, anxiety or stress. These skills are associated with the capacity to soothe, self-calm and cope with uncertainty in the external environment. Behaviors and avoid unhealthy behaviors are associated with the capacity to soothe, self-calm and cope with uncertainty in the external environment. to self-manage classroom behavior, inhibit negative behavioral impulses and focus on goal attainment. The importance of self-regulation in child development is almost impossible to overstate. Kids who learn to self-regulation in child development is almost impossible to a context of self-regulation in child development is almost impossible to overstate. at coping with anxiety and frustration, less resistant to environmental changes and more resilient. They're also better at completing tasks, focusing on a task, shifting their attention when needed and working in teams. interpersonal relationships and minimizing behavioral challenges later in life. When it comes to basic emotional and behavioral self-regulation, every child is different. Kids naturally vary in their early self-regulation, every child is different. or write, emotional and behavioral self-regulation are skills that can be taught through direct instruction and intentional practice with the right combination of motivation/incentives, caregiver support and appropriate environmental/structural context. When we're thinking about nature vs. nurture in a self-regulation context, both are important. In the race to develop these crucial skills, the natural tendencies of a child dictate their starting point on the race track. Some kids start off a little further ahead, and some less, but they can all reach the finish line with effective teaching and support from caregivers. Selfregulation skills become increasingly important as kids get older and face greater demands on their attention, focus and ability to self-regulation. Below, we highlight some of the key behaviors that reflect a growing capacity for self-regulation. in infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Infants are in the very earliest stages of developing self-regulation in infants through self-regulation in infants through self-regulation. Parents and caregivers can observe self-regulation in infants through selfsoothing behaviors like sucking fingers or a pacifier, or shifting their gaze or attention when they feel overwhelmed. Young minds develop rapidly and toddlers are well on their way to developing positive self-regulation between 18 months and three years of age. During this period, toddlers should be able to focus their attention on receiving instructions or completing a task for short periods. They may start labeling their feelings, describing them to others and asking adults for help dealing with strong feelings that they can't yet manage. The ability to delay gratification, a key component of self-regulation, also begins to appear in toddlers. Preschool-aged kids should be rapidly developing their capacity for self-regulation. This includes the ability to recognize a broad range of feelings in themselves and others, and the ability to empathize by placing themselves in someone else's shoes. Preschoolers can learn intentional emotional regulation strategies from caregivers, such as taking deep breaths, counting to 10 and using self-talk to manage anxiety, frustration and other emotions. Implementing these skills effectively will allow preschoolers to focus their attention for longer periods, increasing their ability to tackle complex and difficult tasks. Now that we've reviewed the importance of self-regulation in child development and the role that caregivers can play, let's take a closer look at exactly how both parents and child care providers can promote self-regulation in child development settings. Building positive relationships with the caregiver's understanding that kids who demonstrate a lack of focus or poor emotional regulation are not "bad kids" or "out of control." They're kids who need extra support and care when it comes to developing self-regulation. When caregivers provide this support through warm and responsive interactions, addressing problem behaviors in helpful ways, and providing emotional and physical comfort when a child is distressed, a relationship of trust and caring is formed that provides a basis for the development of self-regulation skills. As with other kinds of skill development, learning self-regulation requires a steady progression of challenging situations for children to master. In the child development context, caregivers can support that progression by offering a structured environment that is designed to support the acquisition of self-regulation skills. To establish a structured learning environment for effectively promoting self-regulation, caregivers should: Make the environment feel inviting and dividers to minimize distractions and help kids focus on their tasks Manage traffic flow in the environment to minimize unwanted distractions Arrange desks and tables in task-appropriate patterns (group seating for individual tasks). Earlier, we defined self-regulation as the ability to control emotions and behaviors to enable goal-directed actions. One of the ways caregivers can support kids' development of self-regulation is by helping them recognize goals, set their own goals, and understand how controlling their emotions and impulses will help them achieve those goals. This is especially true for kids who are struggling to learn impulse control. Goals for toddlers and preschool kids are often related to learning, developing empathy or strengthening social relationships. Caregivers can say things like: "We don't talk when the teacher is talking because we want to hear the instructions and learn something new. There will be time later for you to share your ideas with your parents or friends." "We don't take Timothy's pencil without asking because that will make Timothy feel sad when he has nothing to write with. If you make Timothy sad, he may not want to sit with you anymore. If you need a pencil, you can ask a friend or teacher to borrow one." "We have to share the toys or our friends won't want to play with? Why don't we give Sarah a turn? Later on, it can be your turn again." Explaining goals in this way helps kids see the "why?" behind self-regulation skills help children and adults achieve their goals, but they also help avoid the negative consequences of bad behavior. As kids develop cognitively, they need to recognize that bad behavior has consequences and know what those consequences will be so they can make good choices. As caregivers, our job is to provide a structured environment with consistent rules and consequences will be so they can make good choices. respect, problem-solving and personal accountability instead of resorting to punishments that cause resentment and only work in the short term. When kids haven't learned to cope with strong emotions, they may resort to "acting out" behaviors like yelling, interrupting others or tantrums. To curtail these behaviors, parents and child care providers should teach kids positive self-regulation skills and emotional coping strategies. Kids can learn to deal with big or uncomfortable feelings (frustration, anxiety, stress, etc.) with simple responses like deep breathing, counting to 10, taking a walk or writing in a journal. distraction, focusing on another activity, playing a mental game or getting more exercise throughout the day. Kids develop executive function, use their imagination, follow rules and control impulses. Playing board games or card games can help kids develop self-regulation skills while they increase their proficiency in math and language. They learn to act pro-socially by sharing the game pieces, taking turns, waiting patiently and quietly while someone else takes a turn, negotiating with others and playing fair. winning and losing. Parents can coach their kids to win and lose gracefully by congratulating their opponent on a job well done and asking to play again if they had fun. Kids don't develop self-regulation skills overnight - it's a lifelong process that takes time and patience from caregivers. It's also important to remember that kids who struggle with executive functioning and self-regulation skills aren't "bad kids" - they're just a little bit behind in development and need some extra support to catch up. Caregivers make a real difference when they can stay positive and patient while providing the structure, lessons and encouragement that kids need to develop their capacity for self-regulation. Early childhood education is in a state of emergency, and both staff and children are struggling to self-regulate. Stress levels are soaring for both children and educators, creating an environment of overwhelm and frustration. Educators often find themselves triggered, while children are pushed into a compliance-based model that exacerbates their inability to cope. This leads to extreme pushbacks and challenging behaviors. The demand for obedience and silence only fuels this cycle, resulting in frustrated children who resist and challenging behaviors. The demand for obedience and silence only fuels this cycle, resulting in frustrated children who resist and challenging behaviors. developed a method to address this crisis, one that has already transformed thousands of lives. View her "Triage to Triumph: Empowering Educators with Proven Classroom Strategies" webinar with Procare Solutions to learn what you can do to improve stress levels in your child care center. And to learn how Procare can help, request a demo today! Request a demo and talk with one of our friendly Procare experts to get a tailored child care solution for the unique needs of your business.