

Promoting Self-Motivation and Self-Regulation in Kids with Social and Regulation Difficulties

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WHAT IS SELF-REGULATION?

I. Definition of self-regulation (Donald Winnicot):

- A. "Self-regulation refers to the child's ability to **plan, guide, monitor, and organize his attention and behavior** during challenging goal-directed activities."
- B. "Resisting or inhibiting impulses, delaying gratification, and sustaining attention are all examples of children's self-control or self-regulatory skill."
- C. Overlap with executive functioning (Domains of EF included in the *BRIEF*):
 - 1. Inhibition, Shifting, Emotional Control (Behavioral Regulation)
 - 2. Planning, Organizing, Self-Monitoring, Working Memory (Metacognition)
- D. Common co-occurrence in children of difficulty with the *flexible* regulation of:
 - 1. Attention (e.g, shifting attention from something interesting to something less so).
 - 2. Sensory stimulation (e.g., hypersensitivity to sound, touch, or smell).
 - 3. The transition from being awake to being asleep.
 - 4. Stress, frustration, and anger.

II. When self-regulation systems develop well:

- A. Children are able to deal with complex, challenging situations with good solutions.
- B. Early self-regulation predicts later self-control, social skills, and school success.

III. When a child's capacity for self-regulation does not develop well:

- A. Over-reaction to minor challenges or stressors, acting out behaviors, persistent tantrums.
- B. Impulsiveness, resistance to calming efforts.
- C. Difficulty regulating sleep and diet.
- D. Sensory defensiveness, hypersensitivity to transitions.

IV. A couple of points about EF, self-regulation, and the brain:

- A. Prefrontal cortex (PFC)
 - 1. Regulates thoughts and emotions, motor planning, social/emotional behavior.
 - 2. Represents information not present in environment that we use to guide selves.

MOTIVATION AND A SENSE OF CONTROL

I. Perspectives on the importance of autonomy (sense of control) for self-motivation:

- A. Self-Determination Theory: Humans have three basic psychological needs:
(If fulfilled, people tend to be motivated, productive, and happy.)
1. Competency – self-efficacy.
 2. Relatedness – a sense of attachment, connectedness to others.
 3. Autonomy (control) – behaving with a full sense of choice, volition.
- B. Carol Dweck's "A Growth Mindset" (versus the Fixed Mindset)
1. **Growth Mindset:** Your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. This belief creates a passion for learning, for stretching yourself.
 2. **Fixed Mindset:** Your qualities and abilities are carved in stone. This creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over.
- C. Flow and Intrinsic Motivation: Research of Reed Larson
1. Flow states involve intrinsic motivation and high attention. They involve a balance of the child's internal drive, the child's skill, and the challenge of the task.
 2. Larson found that children best develop the voluntary attention, direction, and self-motivation of adults through unstructured leisure activities.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

I. The relationship between technology and high levels of anxiety in kids and parents:

- A. New technology commonly ends up creating more work.
1. The steam iron as an example.
 2. We work extremely long hours despite countless time saving devices.
- B. Technology dramatically speeds up the pace of life and reduces our rest time.
1. Consider the causes of increased nervousness observed in 1887.
 2. Adults sleep 2-3 hours less than adults did in 1900 (before electric light).
 3. Children sleep two hours less than they did in 1960!

II. The negative correlation between technology use and health in kids, tweens, and teens:

- A. Extent of media use predicts poor health in all four dimensions studied. (L. Rosen)
1. Physical health
 2. Psychological problems
 3. Attention problems
 4. Behavioral problems in classroom

VI. Maximize sleep:

- A. Maintain a consistent bedtime and wake-up time.
- B. Insist that kids use an alarm clock rather than their phone to wake them up.
- C. Require that devices be charged at night in kitchen or another common area.
- D. Make sleep a family value, have family meetings. Support each other.
- E. Encourage teens to wear sunglasses at night; block blue light in the evening.
- F. Make allowance contingent on bedtime.
- G. Melatonin if necessary for resetting biological clock or inducing drowsiness.

VII. Collaborative Problem Solving: (Ross Greene, Ph.D., *The Explosive Child; Lost in School*)

- A. Children's challenges are due to lagging cognitive skills and unresolved problems.
 - 1. These include skills for handling frustration and behaving flexibly, adaptively.
 - 2. Problems not due to attention-seeking, manipulation, limit testing, low motivation.
- B. These challenges are best addressed by teaching skills.
 - 1. Not by reward and punishment
 - 2. Not by imposition of adult will
- C. Three possible plans for responding when realistic goals have not been met:
 - 1. Plan A: Imposition of adult will (by far the most popular!)
 - 2. Plan B: Engage the child in collaborative problem solving
 - 3. Plan C: Reduce or remove specific expectations (accommodations)
- D. Three steps for resolving disputes collaboratively (Plan B)
 - 1. Empathy/Reassurance: Identify children's concerns about a source of conflict. Reassure the child that the issue won't be resolved through imposing adult's will.
 - 2. Define the Problem: Identify the adult's concerns about the issue.
 - 3. Invitation: Invite the child to brainstorm solutions with the adult(s). The goal is to agree on a plan of action that is realistic and mutually satisfactory.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS MOTIVATE THEMSELVES

I. Use the power of acceptance (It's OK for your kid/student to be who he is right now):

- A. The truth is liberating and empowering.
 - 1. You can't make someone do something against their will.
 - 2. You can't make someone want something they don't want.
 - 3. You can't make someone not want what they want.
 - 4. It's okay for someone to want what they want and not want what they don't.

VI. Support kids in pursuing their areas of passionate interest:

- A. Help them find the intersection of what they love and what they're good at.
- B. Excessive gaming or internet use doesn't count.

VII. Teach, model, and attribute love for challenge and persistence in the face of difficulty:

- A. Teach that abilities are changeable through practice and hard work (growth mindset).
- B. Model going against the tendency to give up in frustration ("What I say to myself is ...")
- C. Encourage kids for their effort and strategies, not their intelligence (Dweck).
- D. Hold high standards (Tony Attwood).
 - 1. Treat them like they're more mature than their age would suggest.
 - 2. My experience saying what I'm asking kids to do is for older kids.
- E. Encourage meaningful work, e.g., with younger kids or animals.

IX. Remember that life can be very motivating:

- A. Girlfriend/boyfriend; adolescent desire to be "normal", impress the opposite sex.
- B. Jobs, mentors, internships.
- C. Negative consequences (apparent "disasters" like flunking a class).

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR REGULATING TECHNOLOGY

I. Play games with kids – but also spend regular unplugged time with your kids:

"The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence." Thich Nhat Hanh

- A. Do an hour a week of "private time". Don't take any calls or check your phone.
- B. Play together or do something that is mutually enjoyable.
- C. Whenever possible have dinner together without technological interruptions.

II. Emphasize play for younger children and movement for kids of all ages:

- A. Make believe play is one of the best ways to acquire self-regulatory skill.
- B. Movement is phenomenally good for the brain (see John Ratey's Spark).

III. Require regular unplugged times and schedule time in nature to align with nature's rhythms:

- A. Sports, hiking, camping, biking, etc.
- B. Summer camp.

IV. Encourage "radical downtime" -- time with eyes closed doing nothing: (an important antidote to technology-induced mind scattering and mind racing).

- A. Sleep: It's good for everything.
- B. Meditation: It's also good for virtually everything. I'm a huge fan of Transcendental Meditation.
- C. Daydreaming: Unfocused downtime is crucial for creativity.