

A good match?

A secure and trusting relationship, in the right environment, is key for children to develop internal self-regulation.

Megan McClelland and *Shauna Tominey* explain

Self-regulation development is already beginning at birth. In infancy, self-regulation (see box) is primarily an external process (McClelland, Ponitz, Messersmith and Tominey, 2010). What this means is that other people (parents and caregivers) most often provide regulation for a child.

Children typically provide cues when they need help regulating – for example, by crying or cooing – and look to an adult (parent or caregiver) to help regulate their needs. When a baby cries, a responsive parent or caregiver will help calm a baby by holding, rocking, soothing, changing the baby's diaper, or feeding the baby.

As children grow and develop, self-regulation shifts from an external process to an increasingly internal process. Numerous factors play a role in a child's ability to make the shift, including:

- the attachment relationship between children and caregivers (educators and family members)
- a child's exposure to adults and peers who model strong self-regulation skills
- the caregiving styles of key adults in a child's life
- a child's maturation and brain development related to self-regulation
- the opportunities a child has to learn and practise self-regulation (Bernier, Carlson and Whipple, 2010; McClelland et al, 2010).

LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR SELF-REGULATION

The development of a secure and trusting relationship (or a secure attachment) between a child and at

least one caregiver lays the foundation for numerous positive outcomes, including self-regulation (Calkins, 2004). A secure attachment is formed when a caregiver provides consistent sensitive and responsive care, adapting their caregiving to fit the individual needs of the child (Bowlby, 1988).

Although most infants have many of the same needs (food, diapering, comfort, sleep, love and attention), the cues they show through facial expressions, body language, crying, and cooing may be drastically different. Some children rarely cry, and soothe quickly. Others are highly reactive, cry easily and take significant effort to calm down. Most children fall somewhere in between.

How reactive children are and how easily they calm down relate to their temperament – the individual differences that serve as the foundation for a child's personality (Eisenberg, Vaughan and Hofer, 2009). Children are born with different styles and temperaments, and these individual differences play out in the classroom in many ways. It is also important to note, however, that children's

Caregivers need to provide consistent, responsive care if they are to build secure attachments



temperament is malleable and can be influenced by caregivers and the environment, especially early in life.

Regardless of whether we are aware of it, a child's temperament and personality can affect the way that educators approach and react to a child. Studies have shown that children with more highly reactive temperaments are rated lower by teachers on a 'teachability' scale (Keogh, 2013). In other words, teachers find it more challenging to teach children who react strongly in emotional situations and who take more effort to calm down than their peers.

Other studies have shown that teachers spend more time with children who have easy temperaments (Keogh, 1986). This is not surprising, but what is concerning is the fact that studies also show that educators may not be aware of inequities that exist in the way they view and treat students (Keogh, 2013). Studies like these have important implications for early childhood educators.

The match between a child and an adult (educator or parent/caregiver) can be thought of in terms of a 'goodness of fit' (Rothbart, Posner and Kieras, 2006). Goodness of fit refers to the compatibility between a child's temperament and their environment, including their learning environments (Thomas and Chess, 1986). Educators who foster goodness of fit in relationships with children adjust their teaching approach to match the temperament of each individual child

WHAT IS SELF-REGULATION?

'We define self-regulation as the conscious control of thoughts, behaviour and emotions (McClelland et al, 2010). Simply put, self-regulation is the ability to stop, think, and then act. Another term that you might hear that is closely related to self-regulation is "executive function". Executive function includes three components: attentional (or cognitive) flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory (Garohn, Bryson and Smith, 2008). Self-regulation is the ability to integrate all three aspects of executive function into behaviour (McClelland et al, 2010). (Stop, Think, Act, page 5.)



(Keogh, 1986), laying a foundation that supports early learning.

Think about the children you have known or worked with – no two are alike. As adults, we often find our personalities are a better match with some people than with others. This is also true for the relationships we have with children in our classrooms. As educators, we want to be able to support children's growth and development no matter how easy or difficult it is for us to connect with each child, but the truth is that this can be a challenge. Recognising that we may naturally connect with some children more easily than others is an important step toward recognising how the connections we have (or struggle to have) can affect our ability to effectively teach a child and may affect a child's ability to effectively learn from us.

Developing a secure relationship with children can be a challenge for many reasons. These challenges are evident in the fact that only 60 to 65 per cent of infants have a secure attachment with a parental figure (Berk, 2012), indicating that 35 to 40 per cent of infants do not. Children whose parents are unavailable, disengaged or chronically inattentive are more likely to have insecure attachments and to experience difficulty with close relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1988; Calkins, 2004; Sroufe, 1997). Families in high-risk settings may experience numerous factors (eg, chronic poverty, family turmoil, economic and employment

instability) that contribute to psychological stress and that impact parenting abilities (Evans and Kim, 2013), challenging the ability of parents to effectively establish secure relationships with children.

Although there is some debate as to whether the teacher-child relationship meets the definition of an attachment relationship, there is plenty of evidence that children can build warm and trusting relationships with their teachers and that these relationships play an important role in helping children develop self-regulation and other skills necessary for building positive relationships and engaging in learning (Commodari, 2013; Denham, Bassett and Zinsler, 2012; Drake, Belsky and Fearon, 2014; Howes, 2000; Rothbart et al, 2006).

Studies have found that children who are more engaged with their teachers make greater gains in self-regulation in comparison to their peers with lower engagement (Williford, Vick Whittaker, Vitiello and Downer, 2013). The risks associated with insecure attachments suggest that it may be especially important for early childhood educators to develop a secure attachment (sometimes called an 'earned attachment') with children who may not otherwise have a secure relationship with a parental or family figure.

WHY BUILDING SECURE AND TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS MATTERS

Educators who establish secure attachment relationships and a goodness of fit send a message to children that they can be trusted and relied on. This relationship also helps children

Goodness of fit refers to the compatibility between a child's temperament and their environment



feel secure and safe. By two to three years, children have developed an internal set of expectations for the important people in their lives (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1988; Bowlby, 1988).

If children have learned that these important people will respond with warmth and support when they ask for attention and help, they are more likely to seek comfort from adults, look to adults as models of behaviour, and look forward to engaging in learning activities with adults. The shift of self-regulation from an internal to an external process relies on this foundation provided by the development of secure and supportive relationships. ■

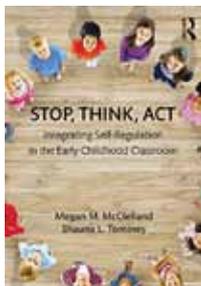
This is an edited extract from 'Laying the foundation for self-regulation', Chapter 2 of Stop, Think, Act – Integrating Self-Regulation in the Early Childhood Classroom by Megan M McClelland and Shauna L Tominey

READER OFFER

Stop, Think, Act – Integrating Self-Regulation in the Early Childhood Classroom by Megan M McClelland and Shauna L Tominey (Routledge, paperback, £19.99, Kindle, £18.99)

provides an accessible and practical overview of what is a 'hot topic'.

Drawing on the latest research, the book sets out how self-regulation



contributes to a child's academic performance, including in literacy and maths, and gives them the social and emotional resources needed to face high-stress situations

throughout life.

Starting with an explanation of self-regulation, its development and the factors influencing

it, the authors go on to demonstrate how early years educators and the 'enabling nursery environment' can aid children's ability to self-regulate. Tips, 'learning checkpoints' and suggested resources are included.

Use discount code SLL15 to receive a 20 per cent discount when you buy through www.routledge.com. The discount is available until 31 December 2016, and cannot be combined with any other offer or discount.