

The Science of Self-Regulation: The Missing Foundation of Academic Success



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Schools across the country are grappling with a rise in emotional and behavioral challenges among young learners who are showing more frequent tantrums, shutdowns, and difficulty with basic skills like listening and sharing. These struggles matter not only for students' well-being but also for their learning, as **strong self-regulation is a foundational predictor of academic success** throughout elementary school and beyond. Research continues to underscore the long-term **benefits of early-childhood education**. Many teachers affirm the value of SEL in helping students **build the self-management skills** they need for future success. This Spotlight brings these threads together to support educators working on the front lines of this growing challenge.



Anna Godeassi for Education Week

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OPINION

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Kindergartners Are Struggling With Self-Regulation. How Principals Can Respond

A school leader recommends three actionable steps

By Ian Knox

Kindergarten marks a critical stage in a child's growth, setting the foundation for their journey into becoming an engaged and compassionate member of society. During this formative phase, children develop a passion for learning, build meaningful bonds, and, most significantly, start to explore and manage their feelings in constructive ways.

Recently, those of us who work in elementary schools have observed a growing number of kindergartners having challenges with self-regulation, which can impact an entire school community. Dysregulated students can create stress, burnout, and unsafe learning environments for their teachers and peers.

As we begin to plan for a new group of kindergarten students to start, how can we, as school leaders, better address these difficulties and equip students, staff, and faculty with the tools they need to thrive?

In this biweekly column, principals and other authorities on school leadership—including researchers, education professors, district administrators, and assistant principals—offer timely and timeless advice for their peers.

The solution begins with trust. Before implementing meaningful strategies like social-emotional-learning programs, teachers, staff, students, and families must have trust in their school leader to foster collaboration, provide guidance, and create unity.

In the Harvard Business Review article “Managing People: Begin with Trust,” authors Frances Frei and Anne Morriss emphasize that trust is “one of the most essential forms of capital a leader has” and the first step in becoming a genuinely empowering one.

This trust, Frei and Morriss explain, is built on three core drivers: empathy (“I believe you care about me and my success”), authenticity (“I experience the real you”), and logic (“I know you can do it; your reasoning and judgment are sound”). For school leaders, combin-

ing these three drivers can help us build the trust we need to address the complex social and emotional needs of students effectively.

Below are three actionable steps that I have found to apply these trust-building drivers in service of a thriving, supportive school community:

1. Demonstrate empathy by taking every challenge seriously.

Leaders must prioritize empathy in their actions to foster trust and collaboration. Demonstrating empathy through active listening, acknowledging challenges, and providing meaningful support enhances teachers' sense of efficacy and builds a stronger, more unified school culture.

A student struggling with dysregulation inevitably leads to numerous meetings—whether with families or faculty. The cues we, as the school leaders, send during these stressful moments can either strengthen trust within our teams or produce significant barriers. As school leaders, our plates are often full, but the moment we signal that one situation isn't as important as another, trust begins to erode.

Attend meetings and classroom visits with full attention, demonstrating that each concern is valued. Validate the emotions of teachers, students, and families by acknowledging their challenges and offering encouragement without judgment. This empathy paves the way for practical solutions to build students' self-regulation.

2. Lead with authenticity by acknowledging your own limitations.

Are you afraid to show the real you in your position? How different is your work persona from your personal one? Holding back too much of yourself at work can create what Frei and Morriss identify as “an artificial cap on trust.”

Leaders who are authentic and transparent can foster deeper trust within their teams. A leader's willingness to admit limitations and

rely on diverse perspectives encourages openness and innovation on their teams. Remember to align your actions and decisions with the values you promote—such as empathy and collaboration—to authentically model the behavior you expect from others.

As building leaders, we often strive to be the “fixer” of all problems in our schools, but we'd be better served being transparent about the areas where we lack confidence. For example, if SEL is one of those areas in which you don't feel completely confident, be honest about it and seek support from your team. This is why it's so important to have staff members with diverse skill sets.

3. Model your logic with consistent and sound judgment.

When leaders prioritize clear reasoning aligned with shared school values, they create a dependable foundation for their team during phases of uncertainty.

As school leaders, we must model this strength in our leadership. When we are transparent about the logic of our decisionmaking, we allow our teams to trust that our reasoning and judgment are sound. Navigating the day-to-day unpredictability of a dysregulated child can feel like a roller coaster, so it's essential that we are consistent. When they know what they can expect from us, our teams are more likely to come to us without hesitation when they need more support.

Ensure your actions and decisions reflect the values and goals of your school team. Stay grounded and steady, so that your staff has confidence in your judgment and reasoning and sees you as reliable. ■

Ian Knox is the principal of Hamagrael Elementary School in upstate New York. He also serves on the board for The Principal Center at The Capital Area School Development Association, where he supports leadership development, mentorship, and collaborative initiatives for school leaders in the Albany region.



Sonia Puffido for Education Week

OPINION

Published November 29, 2016

Learning Self-Regulation Is Needed On Path to Academic Success

By Larry Ferlazzo

Part One considered how teachers can best help students strengthen these self-control skills with suggestions from Bryan Harris, Dr. Jennifer Davis Bowman, Amanda Koonlaba, Nancy Steineke, Mike Anderson, and Jen Schwanke. You can listen to a ten-minute conversation I had with Bryan, Jennifer, and Amanda on my BAM! Radio Show. You can also find a list of, and links to, previous shows here.

Part Two's contributors were Jenny Edwards, Libby Woodfin, Thomas R. Hoerr, Dave Stuart Jr., Maurice J. Elias, and Matt Renwick.

In Part Three, Robert Ward, Sue Defreyne, Allen Mendler, Daniel Rechtschaffen, Carla Tantillo Philibert, and Christine Brandt provided their responses.

In today's post—the final in this series—Donna Wilson, Marcus Conyers, Thomas Armstrong, Joe Hendershott, Jeffrey Benson, Mark Katz, and Jonathan Cassie contribute their thoughts. I've also included comments from readers.

Response From Donna Wilson & Marcus Conyers

Dr. Donna Wilson is an author and psychologist who conducts professional development

internationally for teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Donna's blog can be found here and she can be contacted directly at Donna@brainsmart.org. Marcus Conyers is a doctoral researcher at the University of Westminster and founder of BrainSMART, Inc. Donna and Marcus are the developers of the Drive Your Brain program and their latest book is Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains: Metacognitive Strategies, Activities, and Lesson Ideas, published by ASCD:

Learning self-regulation is one of the key skills young children need to start on the path to academic success. Children are better able to access knowledge and practice learning skills if they understand that they can control their ability to pay attention, resist distractions, and develop social emotional skills. Self-regulation can help students begin to develop a clear intent about what they want to achieve.

A variety of research, from psychologist Walter Mischel's well-known marshmallow test conducted in the late 1960s to a long-term New Zealand study, indicates that children who exhibit self-control at an early age are more likely to perform better in school and on the job and even enjoy better health in their later years.

An important aspect of these studies is that children can be taught strategies that improve their ability to self-regulate. In Mischel's test, a researcher placed a marshmallow in

front of a preschooler and told the child that if he or she could resist eating the treat until the adult returned to the room, the reward would be a second marshmallow. Children who were coached to use cognitive strategies such as focusing on something other than the marshmallow were more successful in the challenge—and went on to use better coping strategies as adolescents and to score better on SAT scores than their peers who weren't able to resist an early treat.

Thus, guiding children in preschool and early elementary grades to take charge of their thinking and behavior can help create an upward cycle in which they experience academic gains and positive reinforcement that encourage their self-perception as effective, successful learners. These teaching strategies can help younger students improve their ability to "drive their brains."

Talk in simple and concrete terms about how children can take control of their thoughts and actions and what benefits they can realize by doing so. For example, in her pre-K/kindergarten class, our graduate Regina Cabadaidis teaches her 3- to 6-year-olds about self-regulation as one aspect of metacognition, or "thinking about your thinking."

Model and point out examples of self-regulation, such as taking turns, inviting other children to participate in an activity, and sharing. Examples of the benefits of self-regulation may be found in everyday interactions among students and in their favorite stories. When Ms. Cabadaidis read *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* to her class, her students excitedly pointed out that Peter got into lots of trouble because he didn't think carefully before he acted.

Scaffold the development of self-regulation by providing explicit instructions and guidance on focusing attention on learning tasks and setting and working toward learning goals and then gradually diminishing this support so that children truly do become more self-regulating.

Over time, children can learn to regulate their thoughts and actions—and reap lifelong benefits by doing so!

Response From Thomas Armstrong

Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D. is the author of 16 books including The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students (ASCD, 2016). His book is available through ASCD, on Amazon, or through his website:

The issue of self-control is a particularly important one for adolescents because the areas of the brain that are associated with self-control are located in the prefrontal cortex

(behind the forehead) and don't fully develop until the early to mid-twenties. During the teen years, the prefrontal cortex goes through a lot of reorganization. Especially key in this transformation is the "pruning" of excess neural connections and the "myelination" or insulation of nerve channels, both of which serve to carry neuronal impulses more quickly and efficiently to all centers of the brain including the limbic system where impulsiveness often runs rampant. The pruning of dendrites in the prefrontal cortex (the branches of neurons that connect with other neurons) is highly subject to environmental influences, a feature of the brain called "neuroplasticity."

This means that educators have a huge responsibility in providing experiences that effectively "wire" those self-control connections in the brain. Above all, educators need to refrain from using punishment, criticism, zero tolerance policies, or other authoritarian methods of "getting kids to control themselves." None of these interventions allows the self-control areas of the brain to properly develop. Instead, secondary educators need to give students increasing responsibilities and should provide them with opportunities make choices at all levels of the curriculum. This effort will help lay the educational, psychological, and neurological foundations for self-control. Specific interventions that can assist in this regard include some of the following strategies:

- let students choose their own reading materials
- use self-assessment frequently in the classroom
- allow for greater student voice in how the classroom and the school is run
- permit students to create projects in areas of interest and passion
- offer more electives at the secondary school level
- use student polling frequently
- listen to students' ideas and opinions with respect
- give students the opportunity to learn material at their own rate
- provide opportunities for independent study

In these and other ways, educators can empower students to take charge of their own learning, and optimally develop those prefrontal functions so important in developing self-control.

Response From Joe Hendershott

Joe Hendershott, Ed.D., is a sought-after speaker on the effects of trauma and working with wounded children. As founder/president of Hope 4 The Wounded, LLC, he also provides staff development training and has authored two books: Reaching The Wounded Student and 7 Ways to Transform the Lives of Wounded Students, published by the Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. Joe has over 20 years of experience as a teacher and school administrator in various traditional, alternative, residential treatment, and correctional educational settings and holds a doctorate in leadership studies and a masters in school administration:

Helping our students develop self-control has major overall benefits, both individually and culturally within schools. Many students who have experienced trauma come from situations beyond their control or environments out of control. Students tend to act out as a way of feeling in control of their surroundings. While this is a normal response to childhood trauma, it tends to present in unhealthy ways like being argumentative, risk taking, not listening, or trying to control others, which could lead to other dysfunctional behaviors like bullying.

By learning to exhibit self-control, others can feel safe around those experiencing emotional trauma or discomfort. Not only is it critical for school safety, but developing self-control helps a person feel safe within themselves and their surroundings. So how do we get to this point? Creating inclusive environments and not only teaching empathy to our students, but positioning them to give and receive empathy with one another is a start to children feeling connected with themselves and others in their surroundings. Children of all ages have a core longing for safety, security, and acceptance. Teaching empathic skills raises one's social awareness, allowing children to be more accepting of one another's backgrounds and differences. When a child begins to feel it's acceptable to be who they are and not judged by others or feel they must fit a social norm, they are less likely to be out of control and be more self-regulated. Isolation should be avoided unless it is absolutely necessary to the safety of others because it tends to feed a child's feelings of not belonging and being out of control.

Here are a few strategies to encourage an inclusive community where children can begin to exhibit more self-control taken from my book *7 Ways to Transform the Lives of Wounded Students*:

- Students need to feel that they belong in their learning community early on. Feeling isolated within this community only feeds their false belief of unworthiness, which then follows them into larger communities.
- Provide opportunities for students to interact within their community. This encourages a sense of purpose and belonging.
- Find redeeming qualities in students. This does not excuse or endorse bad behaviors, but it does allow students to see they have an identity beyond the behavior.
- Seek restorative justice as an alternative discipline approach to further self-awareness.
- True community values its members, recognizing that each has special contributions to make to their community. Having a sense of belonging is critical in helping students feel safe and secure enough to begin exploring their unique gifts and abilities instead of choosing disruptive behaviors.

Response From Jeffrey Benson

Jeffrey Benson has worked in almost every school context in his 40 years as an educator, from elementary school through graduate programs. Benson is the author of Hanging In: Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most (ASCD) and 10 Steps to Managing Change in Schools (ASCD), and the co-author of Teaching the Whole Teen: Everyday Practices That Promote Success and Resilience in School and Life (Corwin), with Rachel Poliner. Connect with him at his website:

This practice is adapted from Jeffrey Benson's book *Hanging In: Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most* (ASCD, 2014).

Here's a practice that is effective for students of all ages, and particularly for students who overtly struggle with stress and anxiety, which may be synonymous in adults' eyes with loss of self-control. Every student has a "Safe-

ty Card” (for older students also called a “Chill Out” card). The card asks students to identify (In either words or a drawing) three activities they can do for a couple of minutes when they are upset and unable to focus; i.e. put head down and close eyes; doodle in a special doodling book; take a walk to the water cooler. I had a student who sat by the paper recycling and quietly shredded paper, another who put on headphones, another who knit. The options are as diverse for students as they probably are for the adults in the building; each of us has learned ways to manage ourselves when stressed, and student need the opportunity to experiment and learn about their own ways of coping. Most importantly, the card gives the students a chance to plan for rough times, rather than trying to think their way through a rough time when their decision-making ability will be compromised by the emotional struggles at hand.

The students keep one copy of their safety card, and the staff keeps another. Students can raise a hand with a silent signal that lets the teacher know they have chosen one of their options. The teacher can later give the students feedback about how they transitioned in and out of their chill-out activity. The students can be praised for self-identifying their escalating emotions, and for making a safe decision to change the situation. Adults and students can also be in an on-going dialogue about additions and deletions to the safety card as the students get older, exploring what chill-out activities help them most.

The copy of the safety card for the staff is used when an adult is asked to help a student gain self-control. The staff person brings the card to the student and says, “I am here to help you do one of your three chill-out options. Which one of these do you think will work for you now?”

Response From Mark Katz

Mark Katz, Ph.D., is a clinical and consulting psychologist and author of Children Who Fail at School But Succeed at Life. For over 30 years, he has served as the Director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological and neuropsychological center in San Diego. He is a past recipient of the Rosenberry Award, a national award given yearly by Children’s Hospital in Denver in recognition of an individual’s contribution to the field of behavioral science. He is also a past recipient of the CHADD (Children and Adults With Attention Deficit Disorder) Hall of Fame Award:

Research shows a strong link between self-control problems in childhood and over-

all health, mental health, and life adjustment problems down the road. It’s accordingly no surprise that prevention specialists are increasingly interested in helping struggling school-age children improve their emotional self-regulation and self-control skills. The following three simple practices can help:

Aerobic Exercise

Harvard psychiatrist and ADHD expert John Ratey, MD, says “A bout of exercise is like taking a little bit of Prozac and a little bit of Ritalin.” Studies show that physical activity helps children pay attention, control their behavior, and do better in school. One resource I recommend to educators is Build Our Kids’ Success (BOKS), a free program that offers schools a well-designed, structured before-school aerobic activity curriculum that’s fun and easy to implement. The program also provides free training and support. Geared initially for students in kindergarten to 5th grade, BOKS has recently expanded its curriculum to include both early childhood and middle school. An initiative of the Reebok Foundation, the program has enrolled more than 1,800 schools. To learn about the three-step process for bringing BOKS to your school, log on to the website.

The PAX Good Behavior Game

The PAX Good Behavior Game is a simple, fun activity in which teams of students root for each other to commit as few behavioral errors as possible during a designated period of time. Time parameters increase as the children’s self-regulation skills improve. The program is proving to be an excellent, universal prevention tool for enhancing self-control skills among school-aged children. Research shows it to also prevent a host of later-life problems among young children prone to aggressive and impulsive behaviors. The PAX Good Behavior Game is listed on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP). Teachers and schools can learn more about the game’s impressive long-term benefits.

Zones of Regulation

Helping students learn to recognize their own emotional states is an important foundation for improving self-control skills. Developed by Leah Kuypers, MA, an occupational therapist and social learning specialist, the Zones of Regulation model categorizes states of emotional control and arousal into four easily identified, color-coded zones, each of which can be explained to students much as we would explain traffic signs. Red means stop. Yellow is a warning to slow down and be

cautious. Blue is like a rest area off the freeway, a place where we can stop, take a break, and get re-energized. Green means we’re good to go. Within the course of 18 lessons, children learn ways to identify their different states emotional arousal and control. Children who previously struggled when asked to explain how they feel gain a vocabulary for doing so. Children also learn about different tools for moving from one zone to another, including tools for staying in the green zone, a zone we need to be in to function well in class.

Response From Jonathan Cassie

Jonathan Cassie is the author of Level Up Your Classroom: The Quest to Gamify Your Lessons and Engage Your Students (ASCD). Cassie is head of the senior school at Sewickley Academy, just outside Pittsburgh, and has taught history, English, Latin, and game design at schools in Dallas, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh. Throughout his 20-year career in independent schools, he has been a student and practitioner of innovation and change in education:

When I think about student self-control, I am mindful of the experience of students in a typical, 19th century classroom configuration. Lecturing teachers. Busy work. Anything-but-just-in-time assessment data to help these students improve their work. In short, the kind of environment where even the most engaged student who loves learning would struggle to sustain their interest.

21st century teachers have lots of tools in their quivers to overcome the problems of conventionality. One of these tools is gamified instruction. Teachers using this method use the mechanics that make games so powerfully effective at attracting and sustaining commitment and attention and turn that engagement towards a meaningful learning objective. In my book Level Up Your Classroom, I argue that systems of feedback and rewards help students direct their own behavior in the classroom. I give the example of how powerfully motivating it is to accomplish something exciting within the context of the game itself, like playing a Triple Word Score in Scrabble. What would the equivalent of the Triple Word Score be for your learners in your classrooms? I also give the example of the video game Super Mario Kart and how it gives you feedback. At every point in the game, the game tells you exactly how far ahead or behind your opponents you are. What would you have to do differently in your planning and instruction to give your students that level of granular feedback? The greatest games already do this through one mechanism or another. Perhaps that mechanism you might use is a finite

resource (like money in Monopoly) that a player would have to give another player if they “lost.”

Games, even the most narrative ones, are always giving the player some kind of feedback to change or continue playing strategy and behavior. What would it look like if you changed a unit of instruction so that, like in a great video game, a student could “die” over and over again as they learn the unit? Gamers don’t flinch when they die in a game ... that means they’re learning. And they know it. Throw them into something, tell them they are responsible for slaying the boss and give them some power-ups and healing potions along the way!

Responses From Readers

Bharath Divyang:

I believe that self-control & self-regulation are extremely important skills for children to develop. They are the executive functions required to create a mature and decent individual in the society. Here are few points that’s necessary:

- This is a skill learnt by doing, not by reading about it.
- This skill should be acquired over a period of time. It takes a good three to four years for children to start showing impulse-control
- It should be a game or a gamified system
- The students should choose it
- It should have a strong element of feedback
- Mentoring the student plays a key role.

Given these points, I believe any activity can be used to develop self-control as long they fulfill these points. I have chosen chess (long tenure, strong feedback, game) and coding (long tenure, strong feedback, gamified system).

But I’m sure others can be used too—I see strong potential in sports, music and even academics.

Thanks to Donna, Thomas, Joe, Jeffrey, Mark, and Jonathan for their contributions, and thanks to readers for their comments! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades. He is currently a volunteer tutor to English-learner newcomers at a local school and to youth in juvenile hall.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Published December 19, 2025

Teaching Executive Functions Should Start In Kindergarten

To the Editor:
Principal Ian Knox’s thoughtful opinion essay, “Kindergartners Are Struggling With Self-Regulation. How Principals Can Respond” (July 8, 2025), centers on steps school leaders can take to respond effectively in the face of student challenges. His advice, rooted in empathy, authenticity, and logic, offers timely guidance for school leaders this school year. But to support young learners effectively, we must also bring attention to the underlying driver of self-regulation: executive function.

Most educators are likely familiar with the skills that comprise executive function, if not necessarily the name: emotional regulation, behavioral control, and cognitive flexibility. These skills are the foundation for how students navigate transitions, manage feelings, and engage with learning. When children struggle with them, we see what’s typically labeled as dysregulation: defiance (fight), avoidance (flight), or shutdowns (freeze).

Executive function is often mistaken for organization or study skills—something taught later in a student’s journey—but these skills should be part of their educational foundation in preschool and kindergarten. Children’s executive-function skills develop over time, with specific milestones at different age levels. For example, focusing on self-awareness, learning inhibitory control, following routines, and developing working memory are all important in elementary school. Early-childhood classrooms should include simple, proactive executive-function supports to foster this development. In many respects, early-childhood teachers are on the front line of this set of skills.

When we invest in executive function as a core component of early education, we create calmer classrooms, more confident students, and stronger foundations for learning. Success is achieved not only when students know what to do but also when they understand what they do. ■

*Jeffrey Ruggiero
Associate Head of School for Academics
The Southport School, Southport, Conn.*

Self-regulation is the most important skill for learning.
And schools aren't building it...yet.



Five things all school leaders need to know.

We are seeing a shift in what school readiness looks like today—one that extends beyond the pandemic. For many children, the self-regulation skills that once developed more fully outside of school now must be intentionally built within it. Research on child development shows that self-regulation grows through repeated, supported practice in everyday contexts (Diamond, 2013)—and many of those contexts have changed.

Children today spend less time in unstructured play, navigate fewer mixed-age social settings and experience more adult-directed schedules than in previous generations. Time once spent negotiating

roles, resolving conflicts and managing boredom is increasingly replaced by structured activities or digital engagement. At the same time, families face greater time pressure, making it harder to maintain consistent routines and sustained interactions.

Schools are now carrying a larger share of responsibility for developing these foundational skills. For district leaders, this shift underscores the importance of instructional models and professional learning that intentionally embed self-regulation into daily classroom practice—rather than treating it as an add-on or assuming it will develop on its own.

“ There is hope in every classroom where educators recognize that dysregulation isn't about managing behavior—it's about building skills. ”

GALINSKY & WILDER-SMITH, 2025

1 Learning outcomes depend on a skill most schools don't build.

Self-regulation is foundational to learning, yet it's rarely treated as core instructional work. Children are expected to be self-regulated learners, but most teachers leave preparation programs without a clear understanding of how self-regulation develops—or how to intentionally build it through everyday classroom practice.

Every teacher needs a clear understanding of self-regulation. It shapes how children manage emotions and behavior, form relationships and engage with learning. More importantly, self-regulation is the engine of learning itself. In early childhood, children develop the skills they need for later academic success through experiences that build attention, persistence, cognitive flexibility and the ability to restore regulation when it becomes depleted.

Research from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child (2016) shows that early childhood is a pivotal period for the devel-

“ Skills practiced in isolation rarely transfer to ”
real-world learning situations. DIAMOND & LING, 2016

opment of self-regulation. Children with stronger self-regulation in the early years are more likely to thrive academically and socially with lasting benefits across their school years and beyond.

2 Many current solutions address symptoms, not underlying needs.

Schools are responding to rising needs but many common approaches do not build the underlying skills children need to learn. Tutoring can help address academic gaps and build confidence but there is little evidence that traditional tutoring alone develops self-regulation or executive function. In some cases, it can mask deeper developmental needs.

Similarly, rewards and punishments may quiet behavior in the moment but they do not build children’s capacity to regulate themselves. Some schools have turned to stand-alone self-regulation programs—a well-intentioned step—yet research shows these isolated interventions have limited lasting impact. Skills practiced in one setting rarely transfer to real learning situations.

3 Self-regulation must be built across the day, not in isolation.

Research shows that self-regulation and executive function develop through repeated practice in meaningful, real-life situations. One-time lessons or isolated programs are not enough. Children need daily opportunities to practice managing attention, emotions, and problem-solving as part of everyday learning.

This requires environments, schedules and activities that are intentionally designed to build self-regulation. When embedded across curriculum design, teaching practices and classroom routines, self-regulation becomes part of how children learn to plan, reflect, recover from mistakes, set goals and monitor their own thinking.

Tools of the Mind equips teachers with practical strategies to build self-regulation throughout the school day—from transitions and wait time to play and partner work. Because these strategies are woven into everyday teaching, schools can apply them immediately and see meaningful impact with benefits that extend well

beyond early childhood.

4 Teachers are the heart of the solution. And they need school- and district-level support.

Teachers play a critical role in building self-regulation. To sustain this role, they need clear district- and school-level support—investment in professional learning, dedicated time and resources and leadership that treats self-regulation as a priority. To change outcomes for children, schools and districts must invest in teachers’ understanding, practice and ongoing support.

When teachers learn to recognize the self-regulation demands and opportunities for development across the day—in transitions, independent work, play and group learning—and shift from asking “*How do I manage this behavior?*” to “*How can I support this child in regulating themselves more tomorrow?*” They also need to distinguish between temporarily regulating a child and supporting the long-term development of self-regulation.

Lasting change requires ongoing, job-embedded learning, coaching and collaboration. When educators are supported in this way, they can build inclusive, regulated classroom communities where children engage deeply in learning and support one another.

5 Self-regulation must be and can be a shared, school-wide priority.

Self-regulation develops over time and across contexts. When it is understood only by individual teachers or limited to early grades, its impact is weakened. For meaningful change, schools need shared understanding and aligned practices across PreK–6 and beyond.

Imagine a school where teachers, specialists, support staff and leaders share a common understanding of self-regulation—and respond to learning challenges, mistakes and misbehavior



Insights from NCES 2024 Public School Administrators Survey



lack of focus or inattention had a severe negative impact on learning and staff morale



lingering pandemic effects negatively impact behavioral development



negative impact on students' socio-emotional development

through a developmental lens. When the whole school works together to maintain and restore regulation, children experience greater consistency, belonging and opportunity to grow. The research is clear, and the classroom reality is even clearer. Self-regulation shapes how children learn, engage and

“ Executive functions are predictive of achievement, health, wealth and quality of life throughout life, more so than IQ or socioeconomic status. DIAMOND & LING, 2015 ”

Ready to act? Where school leaders can begin.

persist—and it is something schools must now build intentionally.

This work does not begin with having all the answers. It begins with leadership. When school leaders recognize that self-regulation matters and can be intentionally embedded across the school day—from academic learning to transitions, shared spaces and routines—they change how schools respond to learning and behavior.

By naming self-regulation as foundational and committing to learn more about how it develops and how schools can support it, leaders create the conditions for teachers to grow, classrooms to become more regulated and children to thrive.

A place to start. Self-Regulation Essentials: A Learning Series for

Elementary School Leaders supports school and district leaders who want to strengthen self-regulation in their schools—whether they are just beginning to explore this work or ready to deepen their understanding.

Grounded in decades of research and practice from Tools of the Mind, pioneers in self-regulation development for 30+ years, the series helps leaders build shared understanding, reflect on current practice and identify meaningful actions.

Make the commitment. This moment calls for leadership. We invite you to make a simple leadership commitment: to recognize self-regulation as foundational to learning, to view learning and behavior through a developmental lens and to stay open to learning more—

through reflection, shared resources and opportunities like the learning series.

Signing the commitment does not enroll you in a program or require immediate action. It signals alignment, readiness and intent—and connects you to a growing community of school leaders focused on strengthening the foundations of learning.

[Click to learn more and sign the School Leader Commitment to Self-regulation now.](#)

Tools of the Mind is a nonprofit dedicated to self-regulation development from early childhood through elementary and beyond. Since 1993, Tools has supported administrators and educators in building self-regulation as the foundation for learning through curriculum and professional learning partnerships with schools and districts.

Self-regulation is the foundation learning needs.



Research proves that self-regulation predicts success in school and life.

Children need self-regulation to focus attention, persist at challenging tasks, learn how to learn, manage emotions, take turns with peers and engage in playful learning that propels their development. Tools of the Mind builds these skills and more.



See how our approach works

Curriculum + Scaffolding
Teaching Practices
Professional Development

The pioneers in self-regulation development since 1993



www.toolsofthemind.org

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Elementary Students Can't Manage Their Emotions. What Schools Can Do to Help

By Lauraine Langreo

Layla Touchet was teaching 1st grade students a lesson on “the grumpies.” As part of the lesson, students were asked to write or draw two things that help them let go of grumpy feelings. But one of Touchet’s students was defiant. She was not going to do what Touchet asked her to do—she protested that she just wanted to color. It was not the first time.

“Whenever it’s something she doesn’t really care about, she’s like, ‘I’m not doing this, and you can’t make me move,’” said Touchet, a counselor for Prairie Elementary School in Lafayette, La. “She’s not wrong. I can’t make her move, but I’m just like, ‘You’re not going to like the consequences, though.’”

The 1st grader eventually did what she was supposed to do, but it took a huge amount of time and effort on Touchet’s part to get the girl to that point.

What is particularly troubling to Touchet is that this lack of self-regulation is now not only a problem for the youngest elementary students. She’s been noticing that older elementary students in grades 3-5 are also struggling with self-regulation—the ability to understand and manage behaviors and reactions to their feelings or events happening around them.

The most common reason classroom teachers now refer students to her is because they lashed out at teachers or fellow students, said something very mean, or showed some form of potentially harmful physical aggression, Touchet said.

It is a trend that other elementary school counselors and teachers around the country are noticing, too. More than 8 in 10 public schools say they’re seeing stunted behavioral and socioemotional development in their students, according to May 2024 data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ School Pulse Panel, which surveys a nationally representative group of more than 1,500 schools from every state and the District of Columbia. They also say student misbehaviors are having a negative impact on learning, as well as teacher and staff morale.

Earlier in her career, Touchet said those types of discipline referrals were few and far between. Back then, students were mostly referred for challenges around executive func-



Anna Goddeassi for Education Week

tion skills, such as following directions and impulse control, she said.

“Their coping skills are not there like they used to be,” she said.

Why so many kids have trouble managing their emotions

Being able to manage emotions, behavior, and attention are skills that humans acquire and develop over time, and the early elementary period is the prime time for learning and practicing these skills, said Stephanie Jones, a professor in early childhood development at Harvard University and the director of the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning, or EASEL, Laboratory.

“What you’re hearing from the educators [about students’ lack of self-regulation skills] are the kinds of things that we would expect to see coming up in elementary school-aged kids,” Jones said.

But that’s not all that’s going on, Jones said.

Several studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting effect on the ability of children of all ages to regulate their emotions, with reports of increased emotional dysregulation and behavioral problems.

Children who are now in the early years of school were toddlers during the pandemic, and older elementary students were just beginning

school when the pandemic hit. School building closures in the spring and fall of 2020 meant that children missed out on important face-to-face experiences about conflict resolution, impulse control, and emotional regulation, according to experts. For those younger kids who weren’t in school yet when the pandemic closed school buildings, Jones said they could’ve also missed out on early socialization opportunities at the playground or the library, for example.

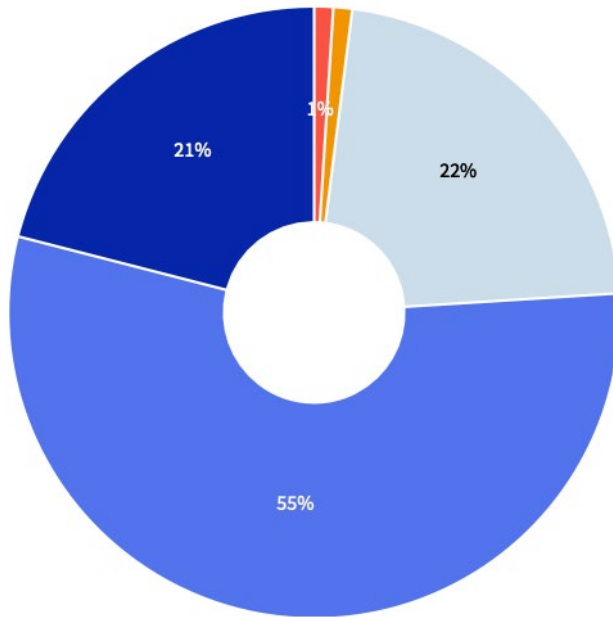
“There are these effects of the pandemic that teachers are still seeing in their classrooms,” Jones said. “Children who might have otherwise acquired a host of regulatory skills by the time they’re in 3rd grade may still be struggling with them because of the pandemic.”

The increase in young people’s mental health challenges could be a contributing factor, too, said Ally Skoog-Hoffman, the senior director of research and learning for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. Research shows that mental health challenges “can impede self-regulation by overwhelming students’ emotional responses or making it harder for them to stay focused and organized,” she said.

Some experts say another possible reason for stunted social and behavioral development could be increased screen time. Research has shown that screen time shortens attention spans and leads to difficulty focusing.

In your opinion, what kind of impact does the social-emotional learning conducted in your classroom, district, or school have on students' so-called "soft skills"—such as the ability to collaborate, communicate, be creative, and think critically?

- Very negative
- Somewhat negative
- Neutral/no impact
- Somewhat positive
- Very positive



*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders whose schools or districts offer social-emotional learning.

DATA SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, December 2024



How schools can teach students emotional self-regulation skills

There are some practical strategies that schools can put in place to teach elementary students how to manage their emotions and behavior, according to experts.

Use of visual supports and tools: Using visual aids, such as emotion charts and self-regulation checklists, can help students better understand their feelings and the steps they can take to regulate them. Touchet uses a lot of visual aids in her class, including sand timers (so students can visualize how much time is left) and visual prompt cards of coping strategies, such as taking deep breaths or sitting quietly.

Educator modeling: School staff can model self-regulation techniques, such as taking deep breaths and reflecting on mistakes. For instance, when Touchet asks her students to take deep breaths, she does the motions with them, too.

Explicit SEL instruction: Schools can provide explicit social-emotional instruction to explain concepts like impulse control, emotional regulation, and goal-setting. These lessons should also help students practice the skills they’re learning about, through structured activities, stories, role-playing, or group discussions.

However, critics have pushed back against explicit SEL instruction, claiming it’s a form of liberal indoctrination or that schools should focus more on academics. Plus, some teachers say they barely have time for academics, much less teaching SEL.

Peer modeling and group work: Students can also learn self-regulation strategies by interacting with and observing their peers. At Powderhorn Elementary School, which serves K-5 in Littleton, Colo., students have buddy days, when older students are matched with younger students to do activities together, said principal Tom Szczesny. Sometimes, there are also lunch groups in which students can interact with peers they don’t usually interact with so they can practice the SEL skills they’re learning.

Having a schoolwide culture that models and reinforces self-regulation skills for students will have a positive impact not just on the kids but also the staff, Szczesny said.

Being proactive, by cultivating these skills in kids, is “the necessary first step to helping students succeed,” he added. ■

How poor behavior affects classroom dynamics in elementary school

These emotional self-regulation challenges “often manifest as academic struggles, such as procrastination or poor time management,” said Skoog-Hoffman. “Having spent a significant period out of school, students may have become less motivated and more resistant to following through with academic tasks that require sustained attention.”

Educators are seeing those aftereffects in their students.

Some students try to avoid class assignments because “organization and time management gets in the way for them,” Touchet

said. Others don’t understand how to begin an assignment; or, if they’re given a certain amount of time to finish one, they’ll say they’re confused about how much time they actually have, she said.

Sometimes, a student will get upset and shut down or cry, said Lavonna Woods, a 5th grade teacher at Ingels Elementary School in Kansas City, Mo. This makes it hard for the student to focus and receive direction or make choices about next steps.

The behavioral problems can cause significant disruptions in the classroom, pull teacher time away from other students who need academic help, and lead to higher levels of teacher burnout.

Additional Resource 
View this article’s charts

DOWNLOADABLE*Published January 13, 2025*

How Schools Can Teach Students To Manage Their Behavior and Emotions

By Lauraine Langreo & Vanessa Solis

Elementary school teachers have noticed that their students don't have the coping strategies to self-regulate—or manage their emotions and behaviors—that previous generations had.

More than 8 in 10 public schools say they're seeing stunted behavioral and socioemotional development in their students, according to May 2024 data from the National Center for Education Statistics' School Pulse Panel, which surveys a nationally representative group of more than 1,500 schools from every state and the District of Columbia. Students' poor self-regulation skills are negatively impacting learning, as well as teacher and staff morale, the survey found.

The COVID-19 pandemic is partly to blame, according to several studies on children's self-regulation skills. Other contributing factors could include the increase in young people's mental health challenges, as well as the increase in their screen time, experts say.

Below is a downloadable tip sheet that spells out practical strategies from elementary teachers, principals, counselors, and researchers that schools can put in place to teach students how to better manage their emotions and behaviors. ■

Additional Resource

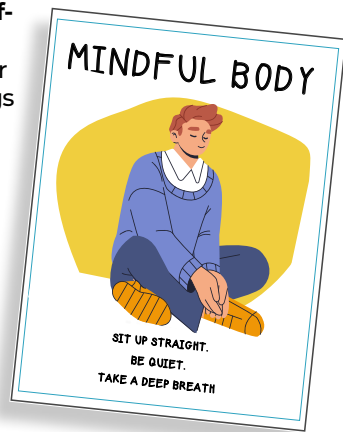
Downloadable on following page

How Schools Can Teach Students Emotional Self-Regulation Skills

Elementary educators are seeing stunted behavioral and socioemotional development in their students, especially with self-regulation—the ability to understand and manage behaviors and reactions to their feelings or events happening around them. Here are some practical strategies that elementary schools can put in place to teach their students how to manage their emotions and behavior, according to experts.

Use of visual supports and tools:

Using visual aids, such as **emotion charts** and **self-regulation checklists**, can help students better understand their feelings and the steps they can take to regulate them.



Explicit SEL instruction:

Schools can provide explicit social-emotional instruction to explain concepts like **impulse control**, **emotional regulation**, and **goal-setting**. These lessons should also help students practice the skills they're learning about, through structured activities, stories, role-playing, or group discussions.



Educator modeling:

School staff can model self-regulation techniques, such as **taking deep breaths and reflecting on mistakes**.



Peer modeling and group work:

Students can also learn **self-regulation strategies** by interacting with and observing their peers. An example could be an older student being paired up with a younger student to do activities together, such as games or reading.



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Published August 22, 2025

Is More Playtime the Antidote to Kindergartners' Behavior Problems?

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Ready or not, incoming kindergartners are now entering the world of formal education, raising the question: What truly defines kindergarten readiness?

Individual kindergarten-readiness “checklists” put out by states and districts vary. But most, if not all, prioritize the ability to self-regulate. For example, “use self-control” tops the expectations listed in the Ohio Department of Children and Youth’s kindergarten-readiness checklist, followed by these bulleted examples: keeping hands to self, sharing and taking turns, cooperating and playing with other children, and using classroom supplies appropriately.

Expecting incoming kindergartners to demonstrate these basic tenets of self-control and civility seems reasonable. But evidence, both anecdotal and research-based, shows that a growing number of children in kindergarten struggle to regulate their emotions and perform other skills associated with this grade level, like cutting with scissors and using crayons.

At the same time, most kindergarten programs have become more academic-focused—leaning into instruction that emphasizes teaching students to read and gain basic math skills and moving away from activities like self-directed play (through centers like painting, blocks, and “dress up”).

EdWeek asked readers to weigh in via a social media poll on the topic. Many respondents attributed early learners’ increasing lack of self-control to kindergarten programs whose expectations don’t necessary align with students’ abilities and readiness.

“They [kindergartners] are having tantrums because they are being asked to do things that 4- to 6-year-olds should not be asked to do,” said Heather Leenders, a former classroom teacher, in response to the poll. “Most, if not all, are not ready developmentally to sit quietly for longer lengths of time to learn in a traditional, passive learning classroom. We all can benefit from learning through play, but it’s essential to these young children.”

Readers call for more play, movement

In the unscientific EdWeek survey posted



Abra Richardson/Tribune News Service

Kindergarten students get settled in their new classroom at Northeast Elementary in Jackson, Mich., on the first day of school. Across the country, educators report that kindergartners are struggling with regulating their emotions.

on our LinkedIn and Facebook channels, we asked readers: “Kindergartners are struggling with self-regulation. What is the most effective way for an educator to help these students?”

More play and more movement dominated the 600-plus votes we received (see chart below). Among the respondents who provided additional feedback, many suggested that the design of today’s kindergarten—not the kindergartners themselves—are fueling emotional dysregulation.

“We ask kindergartners to sit and focus for too long. They need play skills to learn social and fine motor skills. Bring back play kitchens and playing games with others. We also expect kindergartners to demonstrate skills which are not developmentally appropriate. Kids are falling apart in school, which some people believe is an issue with self-regulation.”

—Jayne H.

“Focus and pressure on standards and measures, sitting and filing into orderly lines 8 hours a day. Five to 6-year-olds need to move, play without adult interference, explore and discover, sing, talk to friends without adult interference, hear stories and rhyme, play games, and get dirty. We focus on getting

them to fluently read, write, and do basic addition and subtraction before their minds and bodies are ready to.”

—Samantha S.

“Increased standards for kindergartners, less time for play and recess, no nap time. They’re 5, and a lot of the things we’re asking them to do aren’t necessarily developmentally appropriate. Just my two cents (school psych. who has done plenty of ... kindergarten evals. in the last few years.”

—Rachel K.

Teachers reflect on the shift

Many kindergarten teachers—current and former—echoed these concerns.

Jessica Arrow, a longtime kindergarten teacher at Symonds Elementary in Keene, N.H., said she initially taught her students the way she learned in her undergraduate teacher-preparation program: using a lot of explicit instruction, where her students frequently were expected to sit and listen to her for extended periods of time. “I was feeling constantly frustrated because I was constantly redirecting children. They seemed disengaged, they

seemed unhappy, and I truly did not feel fulfilled in my work,” Arrow said.

After about a decade in the classroom, she pursued a master’s degree in education with a focus on nature-based early childhood education. Since then, Arrow has intentionally infused more play, movement, and exploration into her kindergarten classroom, an approach that aligns with her state’s vision for kindergarten. In 2018, New Hampshire passed legislation requiring play to be reinstated as a cornerstone to public school kindergarten statewide.

Amber Nichols, a former longtime kindergarten teacher and the 2023 West Virginia Teacher of the Year, recalls when the shift to a more academic-based kindergarten occurred in her district.

In the first half of the 2010s, “we were pushing play out, and play was becoming something that we were having to do secretly,” she said. “There was much less focus on play and social-emotional learning and definitely much more academic-based content.”

After spending 18 years in the classroom as a kindergarten teacher, Nichols now serves as the public relations coordinator for the Monongalia County district in Morgantown, W.Va.

It’s unlikely that kindergarten will ever revert completely to the play-centric introduction to formal education that it once was. But perhaps amid the vocal pushback—from both adults and kindergartners—kindergarten programs will examine more closely the dual goals of meeting academic standards for young learners with a propensity toward playfulness.

“There is an absolute place for explicit instruction in which children are seated and they’re focused, and there is a pencil, there’s a marker, there is a whiteboard,” said Nichols, the former kindergarten teacher. “Kids have to be exposed to the utensils that they’re going to be exposed to in 1st grade. But that doesn’t have to be our entire day, and it shouldn’t be.” ■

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