

# How to Teach Self-Regulation

To succeed in school, students need to be able to focus, control their emotions, and adjust to change.

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## Social and Emotional Learning



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Many students enter our classrooms with psychological and learning issues, ADHD, or even adverse childhood experiences and trauma that affect their [executive functioning](#) and [ability to self-regulate](#). They do not have the tools they need to focus and pay attention, keep their emotions in check, adjust to change, or handle the frustration that is sometimes a part of interacting with others or learning something new.

This can make it very challenging to complete required tasks in the classroom. As a middle school special education teacher, I quickly determined that in order to make learning accessible to these students, I had to first work on developing their self-regulation skills.

As a new teacher, you may also struggle with teaching effective self-regulation to students. These are some strategies that worked for me.

## **Provide Structure and Tools for Learning**

Teachers can set up their classrooms to provide the structure and learning tools necessary to help model and teach self-regulation.

- **A positive environment:** The classroom should feel like a safe space where strengths are emphasized. When a problem behavior occurs, try not to take it personally or immediately correct the child in front of others. Instead, act as an observer with the goal of figuring out why the behavior is occurring. Then address the behavior once the child has cooled down.
- **Clear expectations:** Schedules, procedures, and an established routine help students understand what to expect and create an environment that feels structured and safe.
- **Instruction on study skills:** As teachers, we often focus on the curriculum, but in order to access content students need skills like the ability to organize their materials, manage their time, stay on task, read with comprehension, and retain and practice what is learned for later use on graded activities. Teaching study strategies to the whole class will help all students to become more independent learners.

## **Scaffold Instruction**

When students seem off task or even shut down and refuse to complete work, sometimes it's because the work is too difficult for them and they're

frustrated. I found that students often use this behavior because it has worked for them in the past by allowing them to escape the undesirable task and avoid the embarrassment of looking “dumb.” Instead of recognizing that they’re frustrated with the work, the student will often express frustration with the teacher for making them complete the assignment.

Scaffolding is breaking learning into chunks and then providing a strategy or a structure to make it easier for students to be able to accomplish each chunk of learning. In order to effectively scaffold instruction, you need to know what a child is capable of doing on their own. This instructional starting point, called the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), is the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they’re able to do with informed assistance.

Starting your instruction at this point allows the student to move more easily to the next logical step developmentally. If a child is struggling, you can usually help them get started by taking a break, determining what they do understand, and then modifying the assignment so that it’s within their ZPD.

## **Discuss and Reflect**

Kids need objective, nonjudgmental feedback in order to improve their behavior. When a problem arises, find a calm time to discuss what went wrong, why, and how it can be handled differently next time. This gives usable directions to students who do not already have a structure and the vocabulary needed to regulate their emotions.

If a student is familiar with this process, they may also be able to decompress by reflecting on their own, through a written activity, before talking with the teacher. Reflecting helps students to become more mindful: Instead of just reacting to emotions, they can learn to become the manager of their emotions by recognizing what they are feeling before it becomes an

action.

## **Model and Practice Appropriate Behavior**

Students often learn best when you show them how to do something through direct instruction. The same is true with behavior. If students are not displaying productive behavior, the teacher can show them what the effective behavior would look like through modeling activities like “think alouds” or role-playing.

Allow time for children to practice new behaviors they’re learning in a low-stakes way that breaks the desirable behavior into achievable steps. As a classroom teacher, I practiced improving transitions with a group by providing a visual and auditory cue (flicking the lights and clapping my hands). Students knew to stop what they were doing and return to their seat. At first, I gave them several minutes to do this and rewarded students who were in their seats, even if they were a bit loud getting there. Gradually, I decreased the time given and only gave rewards to students who were sitting quietly and listening for directions with their materials out, ready to work.

I found that thinking about behavior objectively, as a skill to be taught rather than simply as good or bad, was immensely helpful in my ability to guide children in learning to control their behavior. Some children enter school without the self-regulation skills necessary for school success. We must meet these children where they are and teach them the skills they need to be successful in the classroom.