

from Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents

by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare

TABLE 4.8: Self-Regulation of Affect

Description of skill

The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Environmental modifications

These are designed to help students manage their emotions (both positive and negative) more effectively. They include the following:

- Anticipating problem situations and preparing child for them.
- Teaching coping strategies. For example, children who get anxious before exams can learn relaxation techniques.
- Giving children scripts to follow in target situations, or things they can say to themselves to help them manage emotions.
- Structuring the environment to avoid problem situations or to intervene early. For example, if children become overstimulated in social situations, then limit the number of children they play with or increase the structure of the play activity.
- Breaking tasks into smaller steps to make them more manageable.
- Giving the child a break if a task appears to be becoming upsetting.
- Having adults model the practice of making positive self-statements. For instance, a parent or teacher might say to the child, "Here's what I want you to say to yourself before starting this: 'I know this will be hard for me, but I'm going to keep trying. If I get stuck after trying hard, I will ask for help.'"
- Giving "pep talks" to the child before beginning a task.
- Teaching the child that how you think about an experience can affect how you feel about that experience. Examples from sports psychology for older children or superheroes for younger children may be a good way to do this.
- Using literature (such as *The Little Engine That Could*) or writing individualized social stories to teach emotional control.

Teaching the skill

This involves teaching the child to independently use strategies such as those described above. For example, the child could be taught to identify and use a coping strategy when she encounters a problem situation or the child could be taught to use other strategies such as breaking a task down, creating a script, or making positive self-statements. A general outline for teaching this kind of skill is:

1. Explain the skill to the child.
2. Have the child practice the skill.
3. Reinforce the child for practicing well.
4. Cue the child to use the skill in real-life situations (classroom or home settings).
5. Reinforce the child for using the skill successfully.

Specific strategies that children can be taught to use include:

- Self-statements to promote a positive emotional response or an effective coping strategy.
- Having the child verbalize a goal behavior. ("Today I will _____") before entering the situation where she can display the goal behavior.
- The use of visual imagery. Here, teach the child to visualize himself managing the problem situation successfully. For example, if the child tends to be a poor sport on the athletic field, have him picture the umpire calling him out on a questionable strike and then have him picture himself walking back to the dugout with a calm expression on his face.
- Having the child incorporate practicing the skill into something she does routinely every day (e.g., journal writing at school or a bedtime routine where the child describes a positive use of the skill to a parent who puts her to bed at night).

• Well functioning executive skills are defined by *self*-regulation of behavior. Hence, the active participation of the child in planning and implementation of strategies is an essential component of successful intervention. When the child is not involved, the goal of intervention—the development of executive skills—is not met. On the other hand, when the child is involved, the very act of participation enhances skills such as planning and metacognition and enhances the child's sense of self-regulation. In addition, when the child chooses strategies, goodness of fit with current skills is more likely, as is the actual use of the strategies. There also is increasing evidence in the educational and psychological literature indicating that students who play an active role in planning and decision making relevant to their education perform better than do peers who are not involved (Field & Hoffman, 2002). For these reasons we believe that children should be encouraged to participate in developing interventions for executive skills at whatever level is appropriate for their age and level of cognitive development.