

Adapting School Wide Self-Regulation Curricula for Students with Special Needs

Self-regulation or self-management are terms that refer to a person's ability to regulate emotions, control impulses and handle stress effectively in a variety of situations. Programs that focus on these skills are becoming a standard part of the school curriculum. Programs such as the Zones of Regulation®, MindUp™ and the Alert Program® provide a framework to teach students to increase their awareness and understanding of emotions, body feelings, and thoughts that contribute to their ability to regulate effectively. Teachers simplify social emotional lessons focused on self-awareness and self-management to meet the learning needs of individual students. They implement tools to support each student's self-regulation. For example, they post visual reminders of strategies to assist with regulation in the classroom and throughout the school. Adults consistently use self-regulation language and they implement concepts at school, at home and in the community to assist children to acquire skills.

Co-regulation is the dance of social interactions. It refers to the effort of all people in an environment to help one another reach the optimal level of regulation. We co-regulate by observing, understanding the effects of our own responses on others and by adjusting those responses to maintain positive, reciprocal interactions. Co-regulation is the foundation of self-regulation. Co-regulation occurs in settings in which ample time is provided for observation and discussion, in which adults talk about and model effective strategies to evaluate internal states and to practice self-regulation. In these settings children and youth are encouraged to provide feedback about strategies that are helpful for them in achieving self-regulation as well as those approaches that are unsuccessful. This practice assists them to develop self-awareness and the ability to reflect.

When facilitating social emotional learning, whether in a group environment or on a one-to-one basis, it is particularly important to attend to the student's understanding of the concepts they are learning, as well as to their ability to integrate learning into their daily lives. Ideally, the language, concepts, and strategies that are taught in self-regulation curricula are integrated into classroom

and home routines and young people use these skills on a daily basis. Taking the time to assess a student's social emotional profile guides the social emotional learning interventions that are targeted and effective in meeting the needs of the child or youth. For example, some young people can clearly articulate Zones colours and strategies to move from one state to another, but have difficulty actually implementing the strategies. This may occur because they are feeling fatigued or overwhelmed or because they lack self-awareness, particularly an awareness of the connection between body feelings and emotions they experience.

The following guidelines for teachers in self-regulation programs support students with neuro-developmental difficulties:

- Establish clear goals for the lessons
- Use guiding questions to orient thinking and attention
- Maintain a consistent order and structure to lessons
- Offer immediate and specific feedback, e.g. "I liked the way you said....."
- Provide opportunities to review learning
- Extend the time devoted to lessons to permit the consolidation of skills
- Offer multiple short sessions that are flexible and that can be adapted to a specific student's ability to participate at a particular time
- Use simple language and visual cues
- Incorporate age appropriate learning strategies into art, drama, music, dance, movement and sports

Students with special needs sometimes experience difficulties that prevent them from becoming fully engaged in self-regulation programs. Individuals who are fatigued because of the additional effort required by these lessons sometimes respond more slowly; this, in turn, can affect a student's ability to regulate and manage emotions. Children and youth with special needs may rely on verbal mediation to a greater extent than many of their peers and they may miss some of the nuances of social communication in the group. Because large groups present greater challenges, many young people function more successfully in small group sessions in which the pace and the teaching is geared to the individuals in the group.

Young people who experience motor coordination and motor planning difficulties may need explicit teaching to make connections between what they think and

what they feel in their body. These students may benefit from instruction in Mindfulness or Body Scans at the beginning and end of each lesson to help them consciously connect to their bodies and become more self-aware. Some students may benefit from an explicit focus on modelling regulation with peers and adults to assist them to understand the connection between what they are thinking and feeling and what they are doing to self-manage. Children and youth with sensory challenges may benefit from changes to their physical environments such as removing colourful objects, adjusting lighting, making adaptations to desks or seating and providing headphones or adding sound-absorbing materials to reduce auditory distractions.

Some young people have difficulty managing daily stress, including their reactions to emotional experiences and they become easily overwhelmed. This dysregulation often leads to responses that are out of proportion to the situation. Many students with this profile are identified as having challenging behaviour. In fact, these responses signal an individual's lack of social emotional competencies and the necessary coping skills. Engaging children and youth in conversations about an overwhelming experience when they are calm and able to reflect may help to establish insights that targeted social emotional learning (SEL) interventions can address. The connection that is established between students, peers and teachers helps to build relationships, a critical component of SEL.

Commercially available curricula are entry points to support social emotional learning in the classroom. These programs are accessible, well-designed and grounded in research. However, they are more inclusive and successful when modified and adapted to meet the individual needs of students and their unique learning and sensory profiles. Embedding the tools and strategies taught by these programs into every aspect of a child's daily routine helps support social emotional learning.

For more information:

- See Clinical Perspective section of this website for additional material
- MindUp™ Curriculum
- Zones of Regulation® curriculum
- Alert Program®
- Calm, Alert and Learning by Stuart Shanker
- Visit Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative at <http://www.self-regulation.ca>