

Ideas for Self-regulation

The following information is based on the work of Tim Feeney (Psychologist)

Introduction

The ability to regulate one's own behaviour is one of the most important qualities called for in our society. It is critical to the curriculum outcomes of "responsible citizens" and "successful learners". Self-regulation develops slowly throughout the lifespan. For individuals who are born with an average neurological profile and have experienced a sufficiently nurturing upbringing, the development of self-regulation comes easily and unconsciously, like learning the grammar of the mother tongue. For others less fortunate, it is effortful and frustrating. Unlike difficulties in production of language, it attracts censure and rejection from others, frequently leading to isolation or poor quality relationships. In turn, these are the most powerful predictors of mental health problems.

The great Soviet psychologist, Vygotsky, developed theories to account for the development of self-regulation which he saw as the primary goal of development. He noticed that children developed self-regulation through collaborating with more able people (usually adults) on activities that would achieve useful goals. Vygotsky saw that adults frequently use language to explain and coach children who would then adopt the language of the adult to coach themselves when the adult was not present. As children become more confident, the use of the language is internalised and becomes part of the child's thought processes, available to them to deal with novel situations.

This process could take place successfully as long as the adults set expectations within the child's "zone of proximal development". If this successful process is constantly repeated, the child will eventually become a socialised and useful member of society, able to perform independently the tasks which were originally shared.

Teaching involves this same process of pitching demands within the zone. For children who already have good self-regulation, this is relatively easy for the teacher to do. Consequently, such children continue to develop their skills in self-regulation. On the other hand, for children who are already poor at self-regulating, it is much harder to pitch demands within their zone and so they fall further behind in the development of this critical quality.

More recent psychological work has shown that the linguistic process described above is underpinned by an unconscious emotional dialogue between adult and child and, if they are not attuned to each other, the conversation will not succeed.

features of poor self-regulation

poor attention control

unawareness or lack of engagement with tasks, interactions and routines

impulsive behaviour

disorganised thinking, talking, behaving

poor social judgment

inability to learn from consequences of behaviour

teaching self-regulation

The process of explicit teaching of self-regulation is that of encouraging pupils to use self-talk through the cycle of self-regulation and develop "scripts" which help them deal with the difficulties that routinely arise for them. The adult does this by being a living example of self-regulation in action, talking through one's own and the pupil's self-regulation with him or her.

cycle of self-regulation

set goal

predict barriers and needs

make a plan

do it, monitoring as you go

review the success of the plan

modified or new goal and so on

At each step, feelings should be made explicit if necessary using techniques such as traffic lighting, feelings thermometer, 5-point scale etc.

scripts for each step

making decisions about goals

"What are you going to do?"

"What are we here for?"

"How will we know we're done?"

"We'll know we're done when it looks like this"

Predicting how it is going to go

Hard - Easy

"Do you think this will be hard or easy?"

"If it's hard, then what'll you need?"

"Have you ever done this before? What happened?"

"I don't think I could do this! How do you know that you can?"

Similar scripts for the following

Big Deal - Little Deal

Ready - Not Ready

Scary - Not Scary

Like - Don't Like

Choice - No Choice

making plans

"OK, so what's the plan?"

"What'll you need to get this done?"

"How will you and I know you'll need help?"

"What will help look like?"

"Don't tell me what you don't want, tell me what you do want."

"OK, so what do you want me to do?"

monitoring

"So, how's it going?"

"Is that helping you? Not helping?"

"Is there anything else you can do?"

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"So when are you going to start?"

review

"So how'd it go?"

"How'd you do?"

"Tell me exactly what happened ... and then what?"

"What do you think other people thought?"

"What were you thinking when you ..."

"Next time you do this, what'll you do differently? The same?"

"What helped?"

"What didn't help?"

Contain heightened emotions

When emotions are heightened e.g. anxiety, anger, sadness, the person experiencing those emotions is looking for those around them to help. They can be seen as 'care-seekers' and they exhibit 'care-seeking' behaviour. With adults, care-seeking behaviour could be the person explicitly asking, "Can you help me, please?". Very often though, care-seeking behaviour is much less direct. When children are very young, the typical care-seeking behaviour is crying for attention and with many needy children this persists in different behavioural guises.

If the person's need for help is not met the 'care-seeking' behaviours are hard to shut down and they are likely to escalate their behaviour in whatever way appears to assuage the pain.

If the 'care-seeker's need is met then they are able to re-engage with others to find a solution. A supportive companionable interactive approach will generally enable the young person to engage in an exploratory and solution focussed discussion of the issue concerning them.

Attune to the careseeker's emotional state

Look at the 'careseeker'

Mirror the careseeker's face and body language sufficiently to convey a sense of presence, availability and competence

Regulate their emotional state

Label what you think they are feeling and saying

Check for agreement

Repeat the above as necessary

Attend to the careseeker's goals

Elicit careseekers goals

Ask 'why' questions and get agreement on goals

Elicit emotions associated with goals