Reaping the benefits of self-regulation: suggestions and strategies

Over the past several years there has been a growing recognition in the research that self-regulation is an important topic in applied psychology, early childhood education, public health and industry (Boeaerts, Maes and Karoly, 2005.) Leading scientists such as Dr. Stuart Shanker have highlighted the crucial role self-regulation plays in our ability to meet success in all domains of life (see: http://www.self-regulation.ca/). A group of researchers from the University of San Diego in California have empirically identified the ten essential qualities for effective parenting and reveal that the top three factors all relate to the theory of self-regulation (Amundson, 2012). The caregiver who is calmly focused and alert, along with a present sense of self, has the capacity to down regulate emotions or stress. When a caregiver demonstrates self-regulation he/she is able to:

1. Attend, respond, identify or empathise with a child.
2. Manage day-to-day stress and personal emotion in order to maintain or, in acute moments, return to a more balanced state of mind.
3. Sufficiently and enduringly maintain balance in adult relationships within the family. The first point reminds us that we need to be genuinely interested in our children and be able to “insert ourselves” into their thinking. When we are attuned to our children, we are able to successfully adjust our internal self-regulatory mechanisms and respond to situations accordingly. How do we become attuned to our children? The answer lies in establishing ongoing reciprocal communication early in a child’s life through play. Children and caregivers are able to both exercise their self-regulatory capacities during play which in turn helps our children establish feelings of security, self worth, and resiliency.

The daily demands of caregiving require continuous management of our personal reactions and emotions. We need to be introspective and self-reflective so that we can assess our responses to various situations and make necessary changes for the “next time.” A caregiver who manages stress and protects their state of mind is able to successfully self regulate and begin each day feeling competent, empowered and emotionally available to the children in his/her care. How do we manage our daily stresses and self-regulate so that we not only “effectively” in our caregiving roles but also feel gratification and mutual joy in the responsibilities that come along with caring for young children? The following list offers some suggestions.

1. Carve out daily time for exercise or a sport that you enjoy so that you will be more committed. Exercise is a widespread method for emotional regulation that works for almost everyone (Walsh, 2011). Exercise has been shown to have definite cognitive effects by altering brain chemistry.

2. Set realistic goals each week. We often try to multi-task and take on more than we are able to manage. By setting smaller, manageable goals we will feel a sense of accomplishment once they have been completed.

3. Reappraisal of a situation is when a person changes the way they think about a specific emotion in order to lessen its impact. A friend recently consoled me about a situation and said, “it’s really not that bad.” (S. Colantonio, personal communication, August 26th, 2012).

4. Pursue a hobby/interest/activity outside of caregiving. When you give yourselves permission to fuel the mind with activities of interest we develop feelings of self-esteem and self worth.

5. Manage your nighttime routine: the responsibilities that come along with caring for young children? The following list (adapted from Northrup and Duncan) provides some suggestions for consideration.

1. Provide options and choices whenever possible. Allow choices within reasonable limits. For example, you wouldn’t be wise to give your preschooler the option of going home from the park or not. Instead, when you decide it’s time to go home, ask if he wants to hop, skip, or race you to the car.

2. Give your children reminders and warnings. When you provide prompts, you help your children make good choices. For example, give verbal reminders about when it is almost time for bed. Introduce the clock and make it a “learning opportunity” or bring out the child’s favourite storybook as a cue that it is time to end the day.

3. Anticipate problems. Try to predict situations that will tempt your children to misbehave and talk with them about it ahead of time. For example, before you go into the grocery store, let them know you will not buy treats because it will spoil their dinner. Reasoning with them beforehand can prevent tantrums in the check-out line.

Since we know about the strong relationship between an individual’s self-regulation strategies and indices of adaptive success (Boeaerts, Maes and Karoly, 2005), it is important that we constantly self reflect on our own responses to a child’s distress and need for help. Are we providing reassurance through our words and actions? Are we modeling resiliency? Are we giving them choices and an array of tools to cope?

Maintenance balance in adult relationships

Within the family is the capacity to facilitate good relationships within a household and is possible when events are managed and addressed in the least demanding, confrontational or emotion provoking sense – all products of self-regulation (Amundson, 2012).

The research literature has demonstrated that children who are able to self-regulate do better later on life with academic achievement and interpersonal relationships (Shanker, 2012). Therefore, it is important that caregivers recognise the vital role they play in helping their children remain calmly focused and alert.

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Research shows young children who engage in intentional self-regulation learn more and go further in their education (Blair & Diamond 2008). Given this, parents, caregivers and teachers play a prominent role in the life of a developing child. So what does it all mean?

Let’s PORSE asked expert Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo, a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University, in Orillia, Ontario, Canada.

In November of 2011, Sonia spent three days in Christchurch, New Zealand with her mentor and fellow colleague, Dr. Stuart Shanker at the Rangi Ruru Early Childhood Education College. During her time at Rangi Ruru Dr. Mastrangelo conducted focus groups as part of an initial study examining teacher professional development models. With the incredible support of Norah Fryer, a tutor at Rangi Ruru, Dr. Mastrangelo has begun documenting the unique model in place at Rangi Ruru which respects the building teacher’s voice. They will be presenting the model along with the results obtained from the teacher narratives and focus groups at the upcoming International Innovations in ECE Forum in Victoria, British Colombia.

References

There is a growing movement to also educate our teachers to assist children (and their parents) to develop these self-regulatory strategies. Researchers agree that to develop and maintain effective self-regulation strategies heavy demands and responsibilities are placed on the individual. Teachers, caregivers, and extended family members can all work collaboratively to help our children maintain a sense of balance and resiliency - even during stressful periods. If we truly embrace the notion that “the children are our future,” then there is no better time to begin talking to our children about what self-regulation is and how they can remain calmy focused and alert in all settings.

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