Ready to Succeed in School: Self-Regulation Skills and the New *Second Step* Early Learning Program

Ready, Set, Go to School!

Is a child more ready for school when she can control her impulses and follow directions, or when she can recite the alphabet? Kindergarten teachers agree: aspects of self-regulation—like controlling impulses and following directions—are more important for school readiness than academic aspects like letter knowledge.[1, 2] Unfortunately, many kindergarten teachers report that over half their students start school lacking good self-regulation skills.[3] The good news is that self-regulation skills can be taught,[4] and helping preschoolers develop these skills will prepare them for a more successful transition to school.[5]

Self-Regulation and School Readiness

What is self-regulation, and how does it help get children ready for school? In a nutshell, self-regulation is the ability to monitor and manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.[6, 7] It's what helps children focus their attention on learning when they might be distracted by others, upset by a problem, or excited about an upcoming event. The ability to self-regulate helps children get along better with teachers and their peers.[8] It's a key to school readiness that supports children's ability to be successful in both academic and social situations.[9]

Good self-regulation skills play an important role in building social-emotional competence—another essential ingredient for a successful transition to school.[10, 11] Children who can self-regulate have skills that help them manage their emotions and behavior and interact successfully with others—all elements of social-emotional competence.[12] Children beginning kindergarten with good social-emotional competence are more likely to be successful at transitioning into school, develop positive attitudes about school, and have higher grades and achievement in elementary school.[13–15]

And yet many children do not have the basic self-regulation and social-emotional skills necessary for successful transition to school, or even to be successful in preschool.[16–19] In the short term, children with these skill deficits experience high rates of expulsion from preschool classrooms.[20] In the long term, they are at greater risk for low academic achievement, grade retention, dropping out of school, delinquency, and criminal behavior.[21] But with a focus on developing children's self-regulation and social-emotional competence, early learning settings can help prevent these negative outcomes and get children ready to succeed in school.

Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

When developing the *Second Step* early learning program, we recognized the importance of developing young children's self-regulation skills. So the new program is designed to increase children's school readiness and social success by building their social-emotional competence and self-regulation skills. The program does this in a number of ways.

Brain Builder Games

Children develop skills foundational to self-regulation by playing short, five-minute games called Brain Builders. The games are specially designed to build the parts of children's brains that help them focus their attention, use their memory, and control their behavior—skills known together as *executive-function skills*. Research links these skills to school readiness[22] and later academic achievement,[23–28] and also shows that games like the Brain Builders can be used successfully to improve children's self-regulation skills.[29–32]

Skills for Learning
The new *Second Step* early learning program further promotes the development of self-regulation skills with its focus on Skills for Learning. Students learn four self-regulation skills they need to be successful learners: focusing attention, listening, using self-talk, and being assertive. These skills support school readiness and academic achievement.[33] As key aspects of social-emotional competence, the four self-regulatory skills taught in the program also support the rest of the program's skills and concepts.[34]

Emotion Management and Problem Solving
The new *Second Step* early learning program includes a lot of other material designed to strengthen children's self-regulation and get them ready to succeed in school. Managing emotions is a central component of self-regulation,[35, 36] and activities in the program's Emotion-Management Unit help children develop skills to manage strong emotions. Problem-solving skills also contribute to self-regulation. The activities in the Friendship Skills and Problem-Solving Unit reinforce the use of emotion-management skills; children are taught that when they are having a problem with peers, it is useful to calm down first, and then to apply the program's Problem-Solving Steps to help them solve the problem safely.

Transitioning to Kindergarten
The new *Second Step* early learning program also helps get children ready to transition successfully to kindergarten with the Transitioning to Kindergarten Unit. Children review the skills and concepts learned throughout the program and think about how the skills will help them in kindergarten.

Ready for School Success
Helping children succeed in school starts well before they get there. School readiness and a successful transition to kindergarten play a big role in children's later school success. Being ready to succeed in school requires more than simply being able to recite the alphabet or hold a pencil. Children need a solid foundation of self-regulation skills to help them stay focused on their learning, get along with others, and work independently and cooperatively in the classroom. Self-regulation skills are a key to school readiness. Teaching them in early learning classrooms will help get children ready for school success.

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