

# SE-2: Providing Consistent and Responsive Caregiving Supporting Children's Self-Regulation

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™

## What Is Self-Regulation?

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Prompt, sensitive, and appropriate responses by an attentive caregiver play an important role in supporting what child development experts call **self-regulation**. Self-regulation is the brain's ability to manage and control the rest of the body and mind. Its development starts with the most basic functions of the body. As the brain's network of neural connections grows and strengthens, it develops the ability to regulate more complex responses and functions. While young children's brains are still developing these regulatory abilities, educators provide critical help in managing situations that children can't yet handle on their own.

## How Do Educators Support Self-Regulation?

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The brain eventually develops the ability to manage four different kinds of responses, starting with the most basic and gradually moving on to more complex and challenging responses to regulate. The infant-toddler educator can help babies and toddlers manage each type of response in specific ways.



**Regulating body functions** During the first weeks and months, sensitive caregiving can help babies' basic body functions develop a steadier, more regular pattern. For example, in the earliest weeks, regular heart rate and respiration can be strengthened by being gently held and caressed, especially when the newborn is distressed. In the coming months, sensitive and consistent interactions during feedings and preparing to sleep can help babies as their bodies settle into more regular patterns of sleeping and eating.



**Regulating emotional responses** As babies get a little older, interactions with adults who are attuned and responsive to children's emotional states can provide external support in calming upsetting emotions and the body's stress reactions that accompany them. Consistently supportive interactions can help children develop the ability to recognize and manage emotions so that they do not become overwhelming. The brain's ability to manage emotional input and reactions develops very gradually throughout the early years. During that time, warm and responsive adult support is needed as scaffolding.



**Regulating attention** During toddlerhood and early preschool-age, children’s brains are beginning to develop the ability to intentionally focus their attention and ignore surrounding distractions. Back-and-forth interactions with educators around a shared focus of attention, such as a toy or book, help children build their capacity to stay focused by giving a child short, manageable “turns” followed by positive responses that continue or extend the child’s turn. As with regulation of emotions, regulation of attention will continue to develop throughout early childhood.



**Regulating behavior** The brain’s ability to intentionally control behavioral impulses is an especially challenging task in the early years. It relies largely on the part of the brain that is the last to develop—the frontal lobe. Switching from one task to another and stopping oneself from doing something tempting but forbidden are examples of behavior regulation that, developmentally, are extremely difficult, if not impossible, for most children less than 3 years old. For this reason, they need a great deal of external help and sensitive, responsive support in managing such challenges.

Clearly, when educators consistently respond to children throughout the day with warmth and understanding, children benefit in ways that literally shape their futures.

*When babies feel secure, safe, and deeply sure that their special persons are there for them, they move out to explore with vigor, absorbed in play. If they become alarmed or feel abandoned or threatened . . . they seek proximity to their beacons of safety, their attachment figures, who know so well how to cope and provide the reassurance and soothing they need.*

—Alice Sterling Honig (2002, pp. 18–19)

**Reference:** Honig, A. S. (2002). *Secure relationships: Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings*. New York, NY: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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