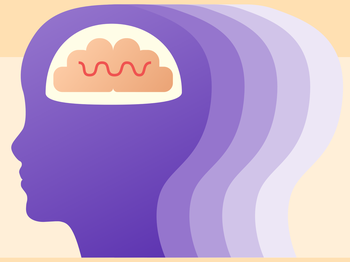
Early Years Evidence Store

Supporting Self-Regulation and Executive Function in the Early Years

Education Endowment Foundation

- Educators can implement approaches that benefit children's self-regulation and/or executive function. Some of these approaches may also be effective in promoting successful learning.
- Some activities to develop self-regulation and executive function are more effective when done regularly and over several weeks or months.
- Consider exploring these approaches alongside those in the Personal, Social, and Emotional Development theme.



Effective approaches to support Self-Regulation and Executive Function	What is it?	Evidence summary of the approach	Put the approach into action
01 Creating and Navigating Challenge	**This approach involves educators creating developmentally appropriate challenges for children to develop and practise their skills in different contexts.**	This approach can support children's executive function. It is more impactful when educators evaluate how well children manage each step of the task, and adjust the level of challenge accordingly. It can also be effective in small groups, when the level of challenge is appropriate for all involved. Physical activities which involve remembering complex movements and adjusting actions based on instructions can improve executive function outcomes. Structured games (computer-based or educator-led) can be particularly effective for children with lower initial levels of self-regulation.	• Adapting • Reminding • Using increasingly complex instructions • Providing opportunities • Memory prompts • Posing problems • Emphasising • Repetition • Teaching strategies
02 Teaching Self-Monitoring and Self-Awareness	**This approach involves the educator helping children to develop an awareness of their own thoughts and emotions, including how their feelings can influence their actions and vice versa.**	There is promising evidence for activities to help children label, understand and manage their emotions, as well as activities to help children become more aware of their physical sensations, thoughts and feelings, such as through mindfulness or yoga. Those activities are more effective when done regularly and over several weeks and months. Mindfulness activities can be particularly beneficial for children with lower initial levels of self-regulation.	• Teaching strategies • Naming and labelling • Making links between experiences and events • Suggesting
03 Creating a Community of Collaborative Learners	**This approach involves educators facilitating children's collaborative learning as they work towards shared goals.**	Some evidence shows that curricula which incorporate this approach can improve children's self-regulation and executive function, though in those instances is is difficult to say whether positive effects result from this approach specifically. Educators can support children's executive function (particularly their working memory) by encouraging them to plan, problem-solve and negotiate during creative and imaginative play.	• Coordinating • Questioning • Providing a menu of strategies • Signposting • Being a co-player • Refocusing • Recapping

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04 Promoting Physical Activity	**This approach involves educators proactively and regularly organising opportunities for children to engage in physical activity.**	Promoting general physical activity, such as running and jumping, can support children's executive function. Regular engagement over several weeks may be particularly effective. Some evidence suggests that educators should focus on moderate to vigorous physical activity, such as running, rather than gentle physical activity, such as walking. Other evidence suggests that it may be more important that educators ensure the activities themselves are developmentally appropriate. Integrating physical activity into tasks that aim to promote other learning opportunities can be effective. For example, asking children to 'act out' verbs from a story.	• Provide regular opportunities for children to engage in simple movements. • Further scoping is needed to understand the role of the educator better in this approach.
05 Promoting Talk about Learning	**This approach involves educators encouraging talk that enables children to plan, monitor and reflect on their thinking and learning. This includes how they plan to approach or adapt an activity and evaluating it afterwards.**	There is some evidence that this approach can improve children's executive function and aspects of their wider learning. For example, adults modelling thinking aloud or encouraging children to explain their thought processes can improve their executive function. Broader programmes and curricula which include this approach can support children's self-regulation and executive function, but in these cases it is difficult to say whether positive effects result from this approach alone. Stories introducing learning strategies, such as planning, and followed by children practising the strategies in playful activities, can improve self-regulated learning.	• Thinking aloud • Planning and sequencing • Evaluating • Making links • Recapping • Using mistakes to learn • Predicting • Drawing attention

Explore the Early Years Evidence Store to find out more about Self-Regulation and Executive Function and other themes, including PSED and early maths.

Scan the QR code for detailed examples and videos of the approaches in action.