

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors by Helping Children Learn to Manage Their Own Behavior

What is self-management?

Every teacher wants children to use appropriate play and social skills to participate in classroom routines and activities but some children need more guidance and structure to be successful. Self-management systems can let children (typically 4 years of age or older) know what is expected of them and to learn to pay attention to their own behavior. Self-management systems are designed by teachers to break down the steps of a task so children can learn to do the task successfully without adult assistance or interference. Using self-managing techniques* children become more responsible for their actions and can learn, with adult guidance and support, to monitor and control their own actions.

Why is self-management important?

When children are taught self-management skills there will likely be positive changes in their behavior. When self-management plans and procedures are developed and followed, children become more independent...which is accompanied by a feeling of competence and pride! When children learn to manage daily tasks by themselves, teachers have more time to teach, play and interact with all children in the classroom.

What can you do in your classroom?

Pay close attention to the children in your classroom and try to determine each child's level of self-management skills. For example, does each child know the necessary steps to complete an assigned or expected task (e.g., washing hands, cleaning up)? If a child does not understand the steps, he/she will not know that the task is finished correctly. Take time to clearly describe the steps of the task (both verbally and with visual cues), remembering to review the steps to make sure the child understands what is expected. Visual displays that include pictures of each step will help the child learn the steps and know when the task is completed. For example, check-off charts with pictures of hand-washing steps or clean-up steps are helpful while children are learning those skills. It's important to note that the goal of the chart or checklist is to teach children how to complete a task; it should not be used to punish or withhold activities. Sometimes children respond well to the use of an earned 'special' activity if they complete the task successfully (e.g., reading a book with the teacher, playing with a specific toy). You should also review the steps with the child after the activity or routine is completed so they know how they are doing.

In time, the child will require less help from you and be able to complete the task easily without the chart or other system. Children who know what is expected of them and are praised for learning new skills will continue the new behavior! Instead of spending time correcting children and telling them what not to do, channel your time and energy into developing systems to teach them what to do.

Research on this topic:

Studies showing the effectiveness of self-management systems have been conducted with young children who exhibit problem behaviors, children with developmental delays, children at-risk and children with identified disabilities. Research has been conducted in many types of settings and with children from many ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Through this research we have learned 1) when self-management systems are carefully planned and followed, positive changes in behavior can be expected, and 2) self-management systems are most effective when the teacher plans and follows the program and keeps track of children's progress.

Food for thought:

Throughout life, children and adults must learn skills to manage and complete new tasks. When beginning a new job, it's always easier to feel successful if you know the procedural steps of the day-to-day work. Having an employee handbook that outlines those steps helps you be successful, confident in your abilities and less stressed. As teachers, we need to provide children with the tools they need for self-management. Once they have mastered a new skill they will be more confident and eager to learn other skills.

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