Ready, Set, Go to School!

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 self-regulation skills.[3] The good news is that self-regulation skills can be taught,[4] and helping preschoolers develop these competencies will prepare them for a better transition to school.[5]

Helping preschoolers develop self-regulation skills will prepare them for a better transition to school.

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.[9–11]

What is Self-Regulation?

The ability to monitor and manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors

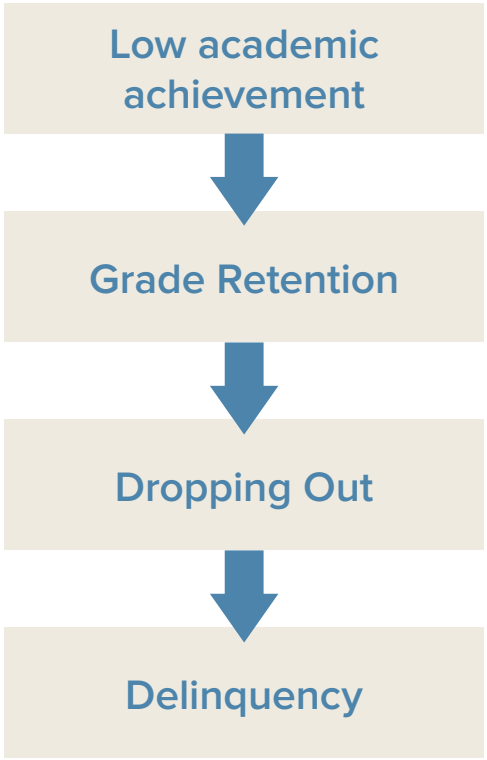
Studies suggests that early childhood represents a sensitive period for the development of self-regulation.[12,13] According to recent research, preschoolers experience sizeable growth in the prefrontal cortex, the brain region most closely linked to self-regulation skills.[13] Evidence further suggests that self-regulation lays the groundwork for school achievement. Considering this, it's not surprising that the ability to self-regulate during preschool represents an important foundation for children's school readiness.

Self-regulation and academic achievement. Not only is self-regulation associated with school success during early childhood, it is also linked to achievement beyond these years.[9,14,15] Research suggests that self-regulation is foundational for school success in that it helps children navigate structured learning environments, avoid distractions, pay attention, stay on task, and persist through difficult activities.[16] Some research suggests that children with stronger self-regulation skills in preschool and elementary school also score higher on measures of achievement.[17] Early self-regulation is associated with long-term academic achievement, such as high school and college completion.[18,19] Together, this research highlights the importance of self-regulation for academic success and indicates that improving self-regulation in preschool may have long-term effects.

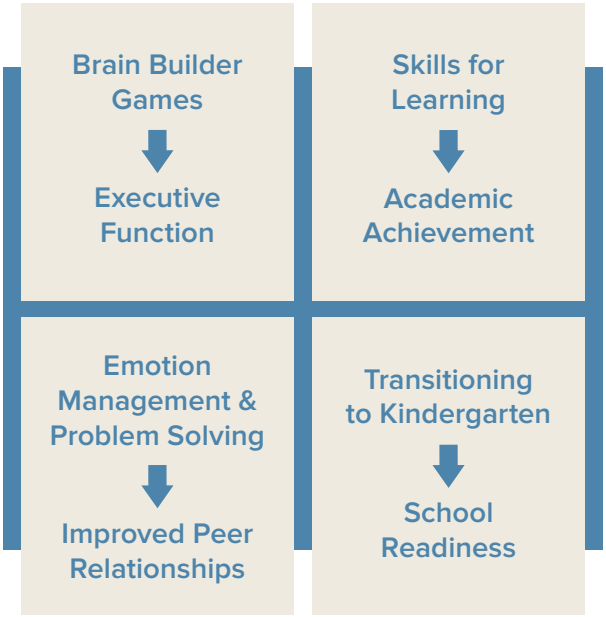
Self-regulation and social-emotional competence. Self-regulation skills play an important role in building social-emotional competence—another essential ingredient for a successful transition to school.[8, 20] Children who can self-regulate have skills that help them manage their emotions and behavior and interact successfully with others—all elements of social-emotional competence.[21] 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.[20, 22, 23]

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.[11, 24, 25] In the short term, children with these skill deficits experience high rates of expulsion from preschool classrooms.[26] In the long term, they are at greater risk for low academic achievement, grade retention, dropping out of school, delinquency, and criminal behavior.[27] 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.

Long-term risks for children with fewer social-emotional skills



The *Second Step* program helps children build self-regulation skills



Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

When creating the *Second Step* Early Learning program, we recognized the importance of developing young children's self-regulation skills. So the 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 four ways.

1. **Brain Builder Games**
   Children develop skills foundational to self-regulation by playing short, five-minute games called Brain Builders. The games are specifically designed to build the areas of children's brains that help them focus their attention, use their memory, and manage their behavior—skills known together as executive-function skills. Research links these skills to school readiness[5] and later academic achievement,[9, 28–31] and it also indicates that games like Brain Builders can be successfully used to improve children's self-regulation skills.[25, 32, 33]

2. **Skills for Learning**
   The *Second Step* Early Learning program is designed to promote 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. The benefits of the four self-regulatory skills taught in the program go beyond school readiness; the skills also support the remaining program content by providing a critical foundation for the development of social-emotional competence.[20]

3. **Emotion Management and Problem Solving**
   The *Second Step* Early Learning program includes even more content designed to strengthen children's self-regulation and, in turn, prepare them for school success. Managing emotions is a central component of self-regulation,[20, 34] and activities in the 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.

4. **Transitioning to Kindergarten**
   The *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 these 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 lay the groundwork for 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 place children on the road to school readiness. Teaching these skills in early learning classrooms will help get children ready for school success.

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.

Second Step: Social-Emotional Skills for Early Learning (ages 4–5)

Help preschool and Pre/K students harness their energy and potential by teaching them to listen, pay attention, control their behavior, and get along with others. When students enter kindergarten with the self-regulation and social-emotional skills taught in the research-based *Second Step* program, they're set up for success.

To learn more about the *Second Step* Suite of programs, visit SecondStep.org.

To discuss how your students may benefit from the *Second Step* program, contact the *Second Step* team at Committee for Children:

800-634-4449
support@secondstep.org

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