

Self-Regulation Skills and the New Elementary *Second Step* Program

Social-Emotional Learning Programs Work

We all want students to succeed—in school and in life. Research tells us that socially and emotionally competent students are more likely to experience this success.¹ The *Second Step* program for Kindergarten through Grade 5 is a universal, classroom-based program that promotes the development of students' social-emotional competence. A recent meta-analysis found that students participating in such programs showed significant gains in social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as academic achievement.² It also found that school staff were quite successful in delivering SEL programs.³ This is all great news. It means students participating in a school-based SEL program have a better chance of experiencing success in school and life.

Making Our Program Work Better

A goal for the new K–5 *Second Step* program was to improve the program's positive impact on students' school success. As we delved further into the research, we found that self-regulation surfaced as being essential in improving students' chances for success both academically and socially.⁴ It has emerged as one of the main operators behind SEL programs' positive influence on academic achievement. And unlike other factors that can influence students' success, such as their socio-economic status or IQ, self-regulation skills can be taught!⁵

Self-Regulation and School Success

What is self-regulation, and how does it contribute to students' success in school? In a nutshell, self-regulation is the ability to monitor and manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.^{6,7} It's what helps students focus their attention on a lesson when they may be distracted by noisy classmates, a problem they had at recess, or excitement about an upcoming birthday party. The ability to self-regulate helps students get along better with teachers and other students.⁸ Students with good self-regulation skills get the most out of school, both in terms of academics and social interactions.⁹ This sets them up for being successful in life.

Unfortunately, many kindergarten teachers report that over half their students start school lacking good self-regulation.¹⁰ Students with poor self-regulation have high rates of expulsion from school, especially in preschool classrooms.¹¹ They're also at greater risk for low academic achievement, emotional and behavioral problems, peer rejection, and school dropout.^{12–15} There's no question that students need to learn to self-regulate in order to avoid these negative outcomes.

Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

Luckily self-regulation skills can be taught—and the new K–5 *Second Step* program accomplishes this in a number of ways.

Brain Builders

From Kindergarten through Grade 3, students develop skills foundational to self-regulation via short, five-minute games called Brain Builders. These are specially designed to build the areas of students' 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 later academic achievement^{16–21} and also shows that games like Brain Builders can be used successfully to improve students' self-regulation skills.^{22–25} In this age range, the parts of students' brains that carry out these skills are still developing. So it's the perfect time to challenge directly and provide practice in these skills using the program's Brain Builder games.

Skills for Learning

The new K–5 *Second Step* 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.²⁶ The benefits of the four self-regulatory skills taught in the program go beyond academics; the skills also support the rest of the program content by providing a critical foundation for the development of social-emotional competence.²⁷

Emotion Management and Problem Solving

The new K–5 *Second Step* program includes a lot of content designed to strengthen students' self-regulation, but this is not an entirely new focus for the program. Emotion management is both a traditional element of the *Second Step* program and a central component of self-regulation.²⁸

Problem-solving skills, another traditional program focus, can also contribute to self-regulation. The lessons in the 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 first to calm down, and then to apply a set of problem-solving steps. Additionally, in the course of practicing the final problem-solving step, students get practice making realistic plans and checking them against criteria for a good plan. Planning is a useful skill that can help students develop self-regulation and that they can use to handle both regular classroom challenges and problem situations.²⁹

Success in Life

Students with good self-regulation get the most out of school. They can focus on a lesson and participate in classroom activities. They're able to make friends and get along with their peers. They can follow directions and make good choices. This steers students not only toward school success, but also success in life. And that's what we want for all students.

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