



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

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

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

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

Studies suggest 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

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

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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.

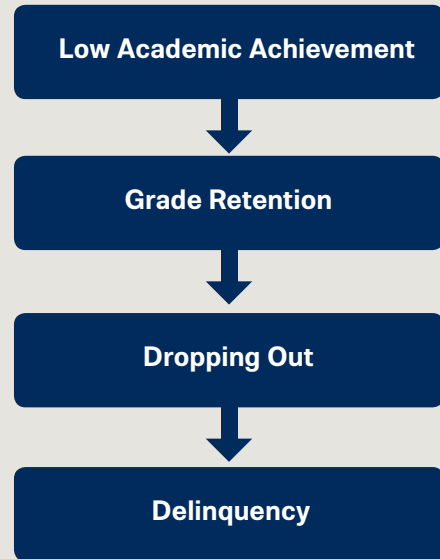
Self-Regulation and Social-Emotional Competence

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}

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.

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

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



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.

Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

When creating the Second Step Early Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Program for Early Learning, 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 readiness⁵ 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 Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Program for Early Learning, 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 Early Learning Second Step SEL 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 Early Learning Second Step SEL 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.

Second Step helps children build self-regulation skills



Brain Builder Games



Executive Function



Skills for Learning



Academic Achievement



Emotion Management



Controlled Self-Expression



Problem Solving



Overcoming Challenges

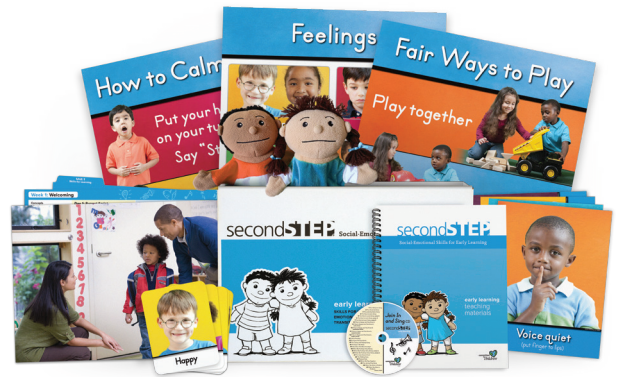
Ready for School Success

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.



Second Step Social-Emotional Learning for Early Learning

Help preschool and PreK 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 evidence-based Early Learning Second Step SEL, they're set up for success.



Second Step SEL for Early Learning

Contact

Research-based Second Step SEL is a universal, classroom-based curriculum for Preschool through Grade 8 that teaches students the skills they need to be safe, succeed in school, and get along well with others.

Learn about more educators' experiences with Second Step SEL at SecondStep.org/success or call Committee for Children at 800-634-4449, ext. 1.

Who We Are

Though we're best known for our innovative SEL-centric programs for schools, Committee for Children is involved in all kinds of initiatives to improve the lives of children. Founded as a nonprofit in 1979 to help victims of child sexual abuse, we continue to advocate for policies and legislation to protect kids and provide equal opportunities for all. From our headquarters in Seattle, Washington, we partner with researchers, publishers, and nonprofits around the world. Our programs reach students in over 70 countries, and we work to make sure all children have a chance to thrive.



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