Introduction to Self-Management

Overview

Self-management, which is also referred to as "self-control" or "self-regulation," is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, delaying gratification, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward personal and academic goals.[i] Students with strong self-management skills arrive to class prepared, pay attention, follow directions, allow others to speak without interruption, and work independently with focus.

Why This Matters: Higher self-management in young children is correlated with positive outcomes such as high school completion and higher income levels later in life. Lower self-management is correlated with chronic health problems, financial difficulties, substance abuse, and criminal involvement.

Types of Self-Management Strategies

Self-Management involves doing something different now (e.g., resisting a distraction, avoiding an undermining behavior, seeking out a different situation, etc.) in order to accomplish a goal later. That requires students to:

- o Think about the future they hope to reach (e.g., earn an A on a project, get the second marshmallow, etc.)
- o Think about how they approach situations and make decisions.

The most effective strategies are proactive:

- o They involve action long before the distraction or decision point occurs.
- o They can be practiced repeatedly long before they are needed.

I. Situation-Oriented Strategies – typically require lead time to put in place

- o **Choose the situation:** Choose to be in places or with people who help you manage yourself
    - • E.g. hang out with students who are working diligently; take a route home that avoids the mall; etc.
- o **Modify the situation:** Modify a situation you can't avoid
    - • E.g., sit at the front of the class instead of in the back with distracting friends; walk away from a fight that's about to happen; set artificial early deadlines to ensure work gets done on time; etc.

II. Cognitive Strategies – may require lead time or be implemented immediately

- o **Change your attention:** Attend to aspects of a situation that reduce temptation or increase focus on a goal.
    - • E.g. track the speaker in class; focus on deep breathing in an emotionally charged situation; etc.
- o **Change how you think about a situation or a choice:** Make a distraction less appealing or make the long-term goal more appealing.

Research Findings Show the Importance of Self-Management

Better Life Outcomes: A three-decade longitudinal study showed that stronger self-management skills in children between ages 4-11 were correlated with key adult outcomes, including high school and college completion, financial stability, life satisfaction, and parenting skill. Lower self-management was correlated with alcoholism and drug abuse, credit problems, and criminal involvement.[ii]

Improved Test Scores: Walter Mischel's "Marshmallow Test" showed that pre-schoolers' ability to delay gratification correlated with a range of outcomes later in life. Children that resisted eating one treat immediately in order to get two treats later scored higher on the SATs (controlling for IQ) than their peers who were not able to wait. The delayers were rated by parents as more academically and socially competent. They were also more able to focus, plan ahead, and deal with stress. These traits continued to be true even four decades after the original test.[iii]

Fewer Dropouts: One recent report demonstrates that, controlling for academic achievement, children with stronger self-management skills at age 4 were almost 40% more likely to complete college by age 25.[iv]

- E.g., instead of thinking of homework as a chore, think of how good you feel when your homework is done and you are prepared for class; imagine there's a big bug crawling on the marshmallow; etc.

III. Impulse/Emotion Suppression Strategies – hard to implement, least effective, and require the most cognitive energy to attempt

- **Quash an impulse:** Attempt to quash an undesired impulse or emotion after it has developed.
  - E.g., try to stop thinking about eating the treat sitting in front of you.

Examples of Specific Self-Management Strategies and Techniques

The WOOP Method

The WOOP strategy, which is positive thinking plus a dose of reality, contains four steps:

- **Wish:** Students name an important but feasible wish or goal that they want to fulfill.
- **Outcome:** Students imagine, as vividly as possible, what the future will be like once they fulfill this wish or reach the goal.
- **Obstacle:** Students imagine the most critical personal obstacle that stands in the way of fulfilling that wish or reaching the goal.
- **Plan:** Students name an effective behavior to overcome the obstacle and create a specific plan using an if-then statement: *"If X happens, then I will Y."*

Plan With If-Then Statements (Can be part of WOOP or a standalone strategy)

Ask each student to name an effective behavior to overcome their obstacle and create a specific plan, using an if-then statement:

- **Writing improvement:** *"If I write a sentence, then I will read it aloud to see if it makes sense."*
- **Tracking assignments:** *"If the teacher writes an assignment on the board, then I will immediately make sure I understand it and write it down on my assignments list."*
- **Test anxiety:** *"If I'm worried about a test that takes place on Friday, then I will meet with my teacher on Monday to talk about how to study."*
- **Attention in class:** *"If someone is speaking in class, then I will follow him with my eyes at all times."*
- **Preparing for a final:** *"If the biology final is one week away, then I will make a list of the key facts at the end of each chapter of the textbook and read through it carefully each day."*
- **Avoiding risky behavior:** *"If students drink at the party, then I will leave early with my friend."*

Create Awareness of When Students Learn Best

Help students understand when they learn best so that they can seek out and create situations to maximize their learning.

- Each student creates a list that completes the phrase *"I focus best when…"* or *"I learn best when…"*
  - Ask each student to identify three things to seek related to when they learn best and three to avoid.
  - Students record how often these situations occur and track their progress over time.
  - Revisit this exercise regularly.

Focus on How to Do Things, Not Just What to Do

Support achievement by focusing on strategies to complete projects and assignments rather than focusing only on the content itself.

- Discuss different processes a student might use to complete a report or project. For example:
  - Create a set of milestones for when particular parts of the project should be done.
  - Build an outline, then add in details for a full draft.
  - Work on sections sequentially vs. starting on the difficult sections.

Self-Management Can Be Taught

o Students write down advice to themselves before starting to pursue a goal: *"I plan to complete the project by doing the following…"*

General Self-Monitoring

Create clear self-management expectations and provide opportunities for students to track their own progress towards these goals over time. Consider adding a public reporting component.

o **Readiness to learn:** Create a checklist and set aside time at the beginning of class for students to assess their readiness to learn: *"Do I have all the tools to learn? Books, pen, notebook, assignments…"* Track the results so that students can see progress over time.

o **Classroom behavior:** Create a simple series of expectations for students that they can track. At the end of each class, have students rate themselves and record their results.

- *"Am I listening to others? Am I waiting for people to finish before I talk? Am I using appropriate language to disagree? Am I using an appropriate tone and not raising my voice?"*

Self-Monitoring With Lists and Planning Tools

For some students, lists and planners (physical or on a smartphone or other device) are critical supports that can enable them to keep track of assignments, prioritize, maintain focus on their work, etc.

o **Create routines:** For example, listen when a teacher gives an assignment, watch what she writes, repeat it in your own words so you know you understand it, then write it in an ongoing list of tasks to complete, with the most important items at the top.

o **Keep locker checklists:** Students keep checklists taped to the inside of their lockers for what items to take home at the end of the day.

o **Break down big tasks into smaller ones:** Take a task list and circle the most difficult thing on the list. Break it down into a series of smaller steps, each of which is much simpler to accomplish. Then write down when each step has to be done to complete the larger task on time.

Pausing, Calming, and Visualizing

Techniques that help students ride out difficult emotions or gather themselves when they are anxious or confused.

o **Step back and breathe:** Students take a physical step backward and a deep breath before reacting positively or negatively to any situation.

o **Expanding breaths:** Students notice how many seconds of breathing in and breathing out they do. For each new breath, extend the inhale by one second and the exhale by one second. Take five slow, extended breaths.

o **Visualize memories:** Students visualize a time when they were happy, calm, proud, or another feeling they want to evoke.

Want to Know More? We have provided lots of resources on self-management and social-emotional learning! You can access them by:

- Asking your facilitator to share an electronic version of the workshop presentation. Hyperlinks are embedded in the "Want to Know More" slide.
- Visiting www.transformingeducation.org.

[i] CASEL.org (http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/core-competencies/)
[ii] Moffitt, et al., (2011); Knudsen, E. I., Heckman, J. J., Cameron, J. L., & Shonkoff, J. P. (2006). Economic, neurobiological, and behavioral perspectives on building America's future workforce. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *103*(27), 10155-10162.
[iii] Mischel, W., Shoda, Y., & Rodriguez, M. L. (1989). Delay of gratification in children. *Science*, 244, 933-938; Y. Shoda, W. Mischel, & P.K. Peake (1990). Predicting adolescent cognitive and self-regulatory competencies from preschool delay of gratification. *Developmental psychology*, *26*(6), 978-86.
[iv] McClelland, Piccinin, Acock & Stallings (2011) Relations between preschool attention and later school achievement and educational outcomes