



Resource Article

*Inside this edition
"Helping Families Understand
and Promote Their Child's
Self-Regulation"*

How do children with self-regulation difficulties compare in terms of television watching to those children without self-regulation issues? Radesky, Silverstein, Zuckerman, and Christakis, (2014) set out to gain more information on this topic.

The researchers analyzed data obtained on 7450 children from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The ECLS-B gathered data on home life and educational experiences of children at infancy, toddlerhood, and upon entrance into kindergarten. The information was gathered using a set of interviews, questionnaires, developmental evaluations, as well as physical exams. Self-regulation in the form of challenges with sleeping, feeding, regulating mood, managing behavior, relating with caregivers and being fussy, demanding, or presenting other action, interaction, or reaction challenges was measured using the Infant Toddler Symptom Checklist (ITSC) when the infants

were age nine months and later when they were two years old. Media exposure was calculated by asking parents how much time their two year old children spend watching television and videos during a typical weekday and weekend day. Covariate factors included child, parent, and family characteristics.

Results indicated a concerning level of self-regulation difficulties during infancy and toddlerhood. At age 9 months, almost 40 percent (39.2%) of infants scored in the moderate to severe range for self-regulation difficulties; just over 18 percent of children scored in the same range both as infants and toddlers.

Excessive media watching was defined as watching more than two hours of television daily. Results suggested that those toddlers with excessive media watching behaviors were: 1) infants for whom self-regulation difficulties were identified at age 9 months, 2) toddlers with self-regulation difficulties, and 3) toddlers for whom self-regulation difficulties worsened since infancy.

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It should be noted that infants with self-regulation difficulties watched only 9 more minutes of daily media at age two years than their peers with no or mild self-regulation difficulties. Also of interest is that children with improved self-regulation skills and those children with no or mild self-regulation difficulties were less likely to exhibit excessive media watching behaviors in toddlerhood.

We know that media viewing by children under the age of two is not ideal. In fact, the following are among the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2010 recommendations:

- For children younger than 18 months, avoid use of screen media other than video-chatting. Parents of children 18 to 24 months of age who want to introduce digital media should choose high-quality programming, and watch it with their children to help them understand what they're seeing.
- For children ages 2 to 5 years, limit screen use to 1 hour per day of high-quality programs. Parents should co-view media

with children to help them understand what they are seeing and apply it to the world around them.

The problem is that children with self-regulation difficulties are being placed in front of the television and media devices more than children without these challenges. This tendency in toddlerhood could very well set the stage for media use into later childhood.

How can we help parents come up with a different and hopefully better way to react to the behaviors of a child with self-regulation difficulties?

Information sharing about television viewing and early childhood may be interesting to some, but for most, problem-solving about the fussy and/or demanding behaviors may be more helpful. These discussions will likely take time, over several visits or more, and perhaps include video observations. They will hopefully culminate in a plan to help parents consider or self-identify alternative solution to ease their children's angst and media viewing.

Radesky, J. S., Silverstein, M., Zuckerman, B., & Christakis, D. A. 2014. Infant Self-Regulation and Early Childhood Media Exposure. *Pediatrics*, 133(5), e1172-1178.

What do the data say?



What are characteristics of good social emotional assessment tools?

Tools to measure children's social and emotional development are necessary for a variety of purposes. They are needed to answer varied questions as part of large and small scale research studies and to inform decisions about individual children. There is also a recognized shortage of quality early childhood instruments to measure young children's social and emotional development.

What are important characteristics to consider and what tools meet the criteria? To help answer this question Halle and Darling-Churchill (2016) conducted a systematic review of available tools that measure children's social and emotional development that would be regarded as strong measures in large-scale surveys and broad use in the field of early childhood. In doing so they teased out 10 key features of strong tools. These attributes included the following and were organized on a 3 point scale from strong to moderate to weak. (p. 12):

1. Reliability (strong included two or more types of reliability - the consistency of finding)
2. Validity (strong included two or more types of validity - the extent to which the instrument measures what it proposes to measure)
3. Size & diversity of norming sample (strong consisted of large [>300] sample sizes with representative diversity)
4. Availability in other languages (inclusion of other languages was regarded as strong)
5. Training requirement (not requiring a trained administrator was regarded as strong)
6. Inclusion of parent/teacher form (strong tools included a parent form)
7. Range of social and emotional subdomains covered (strong tools included at least 2 or more of the subdomains—social competence, emotional competence, behavior problems, and self-regulation)
8. Time to administer (less than 10 minutes was regarded as strong)
9. Cost (strong tools did not require purchase)
10. Age span (strong tools spanned 4 or more years)

Available social emotional tools were identified by searching the internet and gathering information from experts in the field of early child development. Initially 120 measures were identified. Tools that did not assess more than one subdomain, were not for children 0-5, and were not feasible in large scale research were excluded.

From the remaining tools, 75 measures were included in the further classification analysis using the 10 key features. The resulting analysis identified six instruments as "strong" measures for large-scale studies of child well-being. These six measures were: 1) The Infant-Toddler Social Emotional Assessment (ITSEA), Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC-2), Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), Devereux Early Childhood Assessment Clinical Form (DECA-C), Preschool Learning Behaviors Scale (PLBS), and Social Skills Rating System (SSRS).

It is important to note the selection parameters established for this review. If the bounds were different the resulting list might be different. Yet, reviewing measures in light of quality indicators and assessment purpose is an important reminder. To help teams with this, the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development—Center For Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation has a robust tool for searching social-emotional screening tools by the following useful dimensions:

- Language Available
- Acceptability (social validity)
- Authenticity & Equality
- Congruence & Sensitivity
- Collaboration and Convergence
- Age Range
- Time
- Readability
- Cost
- Data Management Systems

The tool is available at: <https://www.ecmhc.org/tools/screening.html>

Halle, T. G. & Darling-Churchill, K. E. (2016). Review of measures of social and emotional development. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 45p. 8-18.



Consultation Corner

Coping with Challenging Behaviors that Result from Lack of Self-Regulation

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Theresa hands her 30-month-old, Luke, a bowl of his favorite cereal. She is floored when he tosses it off the table, shouting that he wants the red bowl, not the blue bowl!

Challenging behaviors are to be expected in the early years as young children have limited ability to regulate their emotions and bodies. This lack of self-regulation means children cannot consistently calm themselves, use words to describe their emotions, or have access to strategies to help them express their feelings in appropriate ways. They communicate their feelings largely through their behavior. A one-year-old throws the blocks he is having a hard time stacking out of frustration. An 18-month-old hits his mom when he wants her attention while she is on the phone. A 30-month-old runs away when told it's time to leave the playground. These children are not misbehaving on purpose; they are trying to cope with a stressor and need help to accept they can't have what they want, to wait their turn, to manage difficult feelings like fear or sadness, or to deal with frustration and disappointment.

While challenging behaviors are naturally distressing to many parents, these moments are actually opportunities for parents to learn about their children and to become more aware of what kinds of experiences that are stressful for them, and what strategies work and don't work to help them cope. This is important information that can help parents anticipate other situations that might be stressful for their children and develop tools and strategies that teach them how to manage these stressful moments more effectively.

Responding to Challenging Behaviors

When parents see these kinds of challenging behaviors through the lens of empathy, seeing that their child doesn't have the tools he needs yet to cope with his big feelings and impulses they are much more likely to respond in supportive and loving ways and take an approach to discipline that is positive versus harsh and punitive. Harsh, punitive discipline tactics can have negative outcomes for children far into the future. Strategies such as shaming, shouting, threats, and hitting may stop a behavior in the short-term, but children are often responding out of fear. Using these methods, rarely leads to children behaving in appropriate ways in the long-term and can increase their negative behaviors (including aggression). Harsh methods can also negatively impact the parent-child relationship.

When working with parents, it is very important to frame discipline not as punishment, but rather as setting limits in a supportive and loving way to keep children safe and help them learn to accept and follow society's rules. This means that parents are disciplining children even in the first year of life, for example: moving an 8-month-old away from his pursuit of a dangerous object; giving a baby something acceptable to pull other than your earrings or glasses; or, putting a 10-month-old who has awakened in the middle of the night back down to sleep after being comforted.

Consultation Corner (continued)

Recent research conducted by ZERO TO THREE found that parents appreciate the importance of discipline and that it shapes all of a child's development and their relationship with their child. And while parents don't want to use harsh discipline methods, they often struggle with finding strategies that are effective and that they feel good about using:

- Over half (56%) of surveyed parents said that managing their child when he/she misbehaves is one of their top challenges.
- Nearly 6 in 10 parents (57%) say they struggle with figuring out the most effective way to discipline.
- Parents find harsher discipline strategies largely ineffective. More than a quarter of all parents (26%) say they "pop or swat" their children a few times a week or more, but a full 80% of these parents say it is not an effective strategy.
- Parents don't want to use harsh strategies. Almost a third (30%) of all parents said: "I spank even though I don't feel okay about it."
- Over two-thirds (69%) of parents said that if they knew more positive parenting strategies, they would use them.
- In a discussion about discipline, one mom of a toddler said: "If I could learn [something] besides the no's...and the time outs that don't work...if there is another way they can listen to me without a spanking, I would prefer not to spank them."

Feel, See, Do: A Three-Step Approach to Responding to Challenging Behaviors

ZERO TO THREE has developed the Feel, See, Do Approach that is a helpful guide for responding to challenging behaviors in a loving, developmentally-appropriate and effective way. It involves three steps:

1) Tune in to Yourself: Step 1 involves parents' becoming aware of their own internal emotional state and triggers in the face of difficult moments with their child. What is going on in their mind and body? What buttons are being pushed and why? How can they calm themselves in the moment tuning into both their body sensations (i.e., racing heart, tension) and emotions? (This step was addressed in depth in the previous article in this ZERO TO THREE series on parents' role in nurturing their children's self-regulation.)

Self-awareness is critical to our ability to self-regulate. Knowing what we are feeling enables us to make conscious decisions about how to manage those feelings and reactions. This is the foundation of a positive and effective approach to discipline.

When children are stressed they need their parents to remain calm. When parents get stressed and respond with intensity, children's stress, and as a result their behavior, often gets more intense too. This makes it harder for everyone to calm down.

Most parents struggle with their own self-regulation. The ZERO TO THREE research showed that 60% of parents wished they had more patience and 47% wished they could do a better job of managing their own emotions. It is very important to validate that it is normal for parents to feel stressed or frustrated with children at times, which is why self-awareness and self-calming is step 1!

Parental self-regulation enables parents to use the thinking part of their brains that is necessary to practice Step 2 - tuning in to their child.

Consultation Corner *(continued)*

2) Tune in to your child: This step involves parents tuning in to what their child is telling them with her behavior (e.g., sounds, facial expressions and actions) and to watch for the cues that their child is stressed. Her eyes might widen, she may lose control of her body, and throw herself on the floor and cry and scream. Encourage parents to think about what happened right before the behavior started. What might have been the trigger? What is a possible meaning of the child's behavior? Is she reacting to: too much sensory stimulation? A challenge that was too much to handle, like not being able to get his shoes on? A transition that is hard, like going from playing to getting PJs on? A change in the family, like having a new baby or a separation from a parent? What might their child be feeling? Is she trying to ask for something? To protest? To avoid something?

We can't always know the exact meaning of our children's behavior, but we can make an "educated guess" by doing the detective work of putting together the pieces of the puzzle by considering all the factors that might be contributing to a behavior. The goal of Step 2 is to help parents come up with a guess about what the meaning of their child's behavior might be.

3)Flexible, sensitive response: This Step involves putting Steps 1 and 2 together to respond to children in a clear, calm and loving way that helps them learn to accept limits and develop strong coping strategies.

For example, Robert tells his son, Martin, that it is time for his best buddy to go home. Martin starts to throw a fit and blocks the door with his body so that his friend can't leave.

Step 1: Robert takes some deep breaths to get calm and remind himself that Martin is distressed and needs help coping.

Step 2: Robert recognizes that Martin is feeling disappointed and sad at having to say goodbye to his friend.

Step 3: Robert calmly and compassionately gets down to Martin's eye level, lets him know Dad understands how hard it is to say goodbye, that he has had so much fun and it is hard to stop playing. (Validating feelings is critical, it helps children feel understood which is calming, and the first step to learning to manage emotions is identifying them.) Then as calmly as he can, Robert enforces the limit by picking Martin up and moving him away from the door. To help him cope, Dad suggests he take a picture of the boys together so Martin can look at it later, and they make a plan for the next time the boys can play together.

This 3-step-approach also works for challenges with children under 2 years. Imagine an 18-month-old, Mariana, keeps throwing blocks even though her parents keep telling her not to.

1)Tune in to yourself: Parents stay calm by reminding themselves that getting upset and frustrated will only increase Mariana's stress and arousal. They use self-talk to think about the fact that at 18 months, Mariana doesn't have the impulse control to stop herself from acting on a feeling or a desire.

2)Tune in to your child: Parents think about what the meaning of this behavior is. It might be that the sensation of throwing blocks is pleasurable for Mariana, as it is for many toddlers. Blocks make a great bang when they land! Or, she may be throwing out of frustration. Because she threw the blocks after her tower kept falling down, the parents' best guess is that she's frustrated.

3)Flexible, sensitive response: Calmly and lovingly, the parents get down on Mariana's eye level, pick up a block and repeat clearly: "Blocks are not for throwing." They remove the blocks and give Mariana a foam ball to throw instead. Once Mariana is calm, they sit with her and work together to build a tower that is more sturdy and steady; this helps build her frustration tolerance and confidence that he can master new challenges.

Consultation Corner (continued)

When to Worry

It is important to consider when to be concerned about a child's difficulty with self-regulation, when it is time to take a closer look, to assess if some clinical intervention is needed. One important cue is when you see a marked change in a child's behavior. For example, a typically flexible child starts to protest every transition. Another important indicator is when the behavior is interfering in a child's ability to learn, develop healthy relationships, and function at home and/or childcare/school. This might be the difference between a child who has a few breakdowns during the day but is able to recover and still play and learn, and a child who has a tantrum at every transition and every disappointment and has a hard time recovering so is consumed with his distress a good part of the day.

It is important to consult with others when interpreting a child's behavior and considering its causes. Sometimes other adults, perhaps teachers, caregivers, close family or friends, have a different perspective based on their interactions with the child. This should all be taken into consideration. For example, a teacher noted that when she allowed a child, who was having a hard time coping in the classroom, to make periodic visits to hug her lovey throughout the day, the child was much better able to participate in activities and calm herself when upset.

If it is ascertained that the child's challenges with self-regulation are interfering in her daily functioning, it is important to connect the family with intervention services, such as the following evidence-based programs:

- [Triple P \(Positive Parenting Program\)](#),
- [Incredible Years Parenting Program](#)
- [Parent-Child Interaction Therapy](#)

Additional Resources on Nurturing Self-Regulation

ZERO TO THREE has developed many resources that help parents and practitioners nurture children's self-regulation and to respond loving and effectively to challenging behaviors, including:

- **Social Emotional Development—range of resources:** <https://www.zerotothree.org/early-development/social-and-emotional-development>
- **Survival Guide for Parents:** <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1603-toddlers-and-self-control-a-survival-guide-for-parents>
- **Nurturing Self-Control from 0-12 Months:** <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1283-developing-self-control-from-0-12-months>
- **Nurturing Self-Control from 12 to 24 Months:** <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/96-how-toddlers-learn-self-control-from-12-to-24-months>
- **Nurturing Self-Control from 24 to 36 Months:** <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/26-learning-self-control-24-to-36-months>

Consultation Corner (continued)

Below are resources developed specifically for military families that help parents think about what a child might be saying through their behavior, then to respond to that need rather than responding to the behavior. Practical suggestions are made to offer comfort and support for the social-emotional needs of the young military child.

- **New Families: How to Nurture New Relationships:**
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/429-new-families-how-to-nurture-new-relationships>
- **Homefront: How to Take Care of Yourself While Your Partner Is Away:**
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/428-homefront-how-to-take-care-of-yourself-while-your-partner-is-away>
- **Deployment: How to Keep Relationships Strong:**
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/426-deployment-how-to-keep-relationships-strong>
- **Homecoming, How to Reconnect After Separation:**
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/427-homecoming-how-to-reconnect-after-separation>
- **Combat Stress: The Invisible Injuries of War:**
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/430-combat-stress-the-invisible-injuries-of-war>
- **Babies on the Homefront (app):** <http://babiesonthehomefront.org/>
 Available for free for mobile phones and tablets, this app connects parents to information on challenging behaviors, activities to strengthen connections between parents and their child, and parental self-care. It includes both quick bits of information and short videos. Babies on the Homefront is designed to strengthen parental reflective functioning and promote parental self-care. It even includes a 2-minute relaxation vodcast! One of the topics parents can find within Babies on the Homefront is “How My Child Develops Self-Control.” Parents can set the app on their child’s age and learn of actions they can take to help strengthen their child’s developing ability to self-regulate. For older toddlers, it includes information about helping a young child learn to accept limit-setting. Parents can also get tips for dealing with a fussy baby, or their toddler’s tantrums. Babies on the Homefront and the military family resources found on the ZERO TO THREE website are available in English and Spanish.



On the WWW

The California Preschool Instructional Network (CPIN) presents a 7 part research series on social emotional development by Dr. Ross A. Thompson. Dr. Thompson is a distinguished professor of psychology at University of California, Davis and ZERO TO THREE's board president. He has extensive experience researching, teaching, and promoting the developmental importance of social emotional development.

The CPIN series includes a 40 minute presentation on self-regulation, which is particularly pertinent to this KIT series. The other topics covered in the research series are equally informative and include brain development, early childhood stress, cooperation and responsibility, peer relationships, and relationships with teachers. The entire series is available online at:

<https://cpin.us/content/cpin-research-series-event-dr-ross-thompson-1>

Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

In line with the focus on **Helping Families Understand and Promote Their Child's Self-Regulation**, readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (February through June and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam for this series in July 2018. There is no need to register for the CEUs.

Rather, if you are interested, complete the exam online at www.edis.army.mil

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

KIT Newsletters
are available
online at
www.edis.army.mil

Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.

