

Tips for parents

Making young people ready for learning
and preparing them well for life



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Self-regulation

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You can find more information on self-regulation at INSTITUT BILDUNG plus:



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Self-regulation

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Does any of this sound familiar? What used to be a matter of course, such as regular bedtimes and meal times or doing things together, suddenly seem to have stopped.

Your child who was once so familiar to you is mutating into a strange being. Conflicts in the day are followed by troubled nights. You just hope that both your child and your own relationship will survive this phase of life.

On school days, some wander off unwashed, others with designer styling, headphones over their ears, mobile phone in one hand and energy drink in the other. Does he really not have any classes until third period today? Whereas, back in primary school days, all you used to fish out of your child's satchel was a stale sandwich, now you are horrified when you come across cigarette filters and condoms between the mountains of crumpled homework sheets in your teenager's rucksack.

And their bedroom! Why do you need a dining table when you have a bed? Wardrobes are really overrated nowadays, too. When it all crosses the parental pain barrier, room service is all-inclusive. And you have always done your best. Or have you just done everything wrong?

No, of course not. In the adolescent years, not only the parent-child relationship but also the way your child's brain is developing is thrown off kilter, which is why teenagers suddenly find self-regulation more difficult for a time. Especially where emotions are involved and control of motivation is required.

Self-regulation – something you have to learn

If you have a good capacity to self-regulate, many aspects of life become easier and you are more successful. If you are self-regulated, you are flexible, able to focus your attention and consciously control your feelings and motivation, you do not lose sight of your own objectives, and you are able to go about things in a well-planned, organised and structured way. These are important skills for both learning and life. That's all very nice to read and it sounds good. But developing and implementing these capabilities can be endlessly difficult, depending on the specific situation and the person's own physical and psychological nature.

Self-regulation is a lifelong task. The earlier and more frequently you practise it, the easier it becomes. You have to practise self-regulation, just like reading, writing and riding a bike. The only problem is that this learning process takes much longer. Children and adolescents rely on the support of their parents and other adult attachment figures in this context.

Authoritative parenting style – friendly and firm

The parenting style that promotes the development of the capacity to self-regulate best is the authoritative parenting style. It is the golden mean between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian parenting. The authoritative parenting style is characterised by love, appreciation and support, in which the opinion of the children is respected and, where expedient and possible, taken into account. At the same time, there are clear rules and consequences, and the parents ensure compliance with them.¹ The brain is always looking for rules. It is therefore referred to as a rule extractor. This form of parenting is brain-appropriate parenting based on logic. Rules and consequences are explained calmly and clearly in advance so that the children can understand them.¹

Rules and consequences are not simply put in place for their own sake but to make the children and adolescents more competent and allow them to mature into responsible people. So allow your

children to experience the consequences of their behaviour.² It has been scientifically proven that children with authoritative parenting perform better at school and have better social and emotional skills.³

If the adolescents operate within the agreed rules, they have plenty of autonomy.¹ If they overstep the rules, the parents remain as calm as possible and wait out their children's frustration and the chaos that can ensue in these situations. If parents act impulsively and with outbursts of anger, the child will find it difficult to learn to think before responding and to remain calm when they are angry. Self-regulation is therefore a task that involves both acting as a role model and parenting skills. We have to take on this task as parents (legally at least until our children become adults), even and especially when it becomes challenging and stressful.

Adolescents therefore need strong parents to allow them to learn self-regulation and develop mental strength. Parents who do not shy away from conflict situations with their children but recognise the opportunities and possibilities for practice that they bring and exploit them.



Super-powers for self-regulation – the executive functions

The brain functions that support the ability to self-regulate are the executive functions of the frontal lobe:



Working memory

This can store information for a short time (e.g. remembering what the teacher has just said), work with the stored information (e.g. results of mental calculations, apply what has been learned to other areas, learn from mistakes) and call on information from the temporary or long-term memory (e.g. what has been learned in classwork and tests or the agreed rules that apply at home).

Inhibition

This is evident in the control of impulses (e.g. not shouting out in class, leaving a mobile phone switched off, being able to end an argument, being able to say 'no' when 'offered' a cigarette or other drugs) and in attention control (not allowing yourself to be distracted when learning).

Cognitive flexibility

This facilitates adaptability of behaviour (e.g. switching from chilling to doing something, moving from a break to a lesson) and of attention control (e.g. from talking to a classmate to listening to the teacher or in continuously changing road traffic situations).

Initiation

This refers to starting and completing an action independently (e.g. doing homework or cleaning your bedroom).

It is very helpful if adolescents are familiar with the executive functions that are required in almost every situation in life. Usually in combination and especially when the current situation is challenging. In



order to deal with such situations effectively, the young person 'only' has to ask themselves: 'Which executive functions do I need at the moment?' and then implement them.

Let's imagine a teenager who is lying in bed at home scrolling through their mobile phone in the afternoon. But in fact, they should be preparing for a class test.

- First, they have to remember about it – working memory.
- Then they have to stop staring at their mobile phone – inhibition.
- Put their phone down, get out of bed and sit at the desk – flexibility and initiation.
- Think about all the material for the class test and what they need to learn – working memory.
- Start studying – initiation.
- Not allow themselves to be distracted – focused attention/ inhibition.

As they go through the work, they are simultaneously training their willingness to make an effort, their determination and thus their self-discipline and willpower. These skills can actually be trained like a muscle in everyday situations.⁴ Especially when they require motivation and effort, such as studying, practising an instrument, tidying up or playing sport.

Growth Begins Where Easy Ends

Challenging situations are key to practising and learning self-regulation. Mental strength and resilience develop if you repeatedly face up to cognitively (learning-related), physically (exercise-related), emotionally (related to stress, fear, anger, disappointment) and motivationally (related to tasks you don't enjoy) challenging situations and learn to cope with them.

If you demonstrate this motivation and effort even after setbacks and failures (not getting the mark of 3 you were hoping for in the class test but only a 4 minus), you are on the route to success. Successful people are characterised by this capacity: when they fail, they do not give up but motivate themselves again. They put in extra effort and pursue their objectives over an extended period, even over years. For success in learning and in life, the work you put in is what matters, talent is less important.^{5,6} You should therefore praise your child's willingness to try.⁷ In this way, adolescents will start taking pleasure in making an effort and in performing well.⁸



Self-regulation – a question of brain development and practice

There are neurobiological reasons why children and adolescents initially have great difficulty in effectively controlling their attention, their behaviour, their feelings and their motivation. The front part of their frontal lobe, the prefrontal cortex, which plays a key part in controlling these abilities, is not yet mature. The development process lasts throughout childhood and the adolescent phase, all the way through into adult age at the age of around 25.

As the prefrontal cortex not only develops slowly but also learns comparatively slowly, children and adolescents need to come across thousands of situations in the course of their development in which they can train their executive functions and practise self-regulation and self-control. The development of self-regulation does not just take days, weeks or even months – it takes years, even decades.

It would be a mistake to think, however, that all we need to do is wait for the brain to become sufficiently mature, then we will all be experts in self-regulation. That is certainly wide of the mark! Self-regulation does not just happen automatically. No one can just start walking on their hands simply because the motor cortex is mature. Practice makes perfect! The same applies to self-regulation. Anyone who does not have the opportunity to practise it will not learn it. So encourage your children to take on challenges. It is important, for example, that they have the experience of ending up on the losing side. All of us will lose over the course of our lives. Learning to lose while playing is therefore a valuable opportunity to prepare yourself for life.

The same applies to the willingness to try and perseverance, especially when you lose motivation. The capacity to do something even when you don't feel like it is referred to as delayed gratification. It is central to success in learning and in life and the basis of contentedness.⁹ But how are young adults expected to demonstrate these capacities in their professional lives if they did not have the opportunity to practise them as children and adolescents – because they did not have to do anything they did not want to.

I want to have fun! I'm putting my foot to the floor! – when the neuronal brake fails

The prefrontal cortex supports the capacity for delayed gratification. It is there to analyse situations, plan learning and do what needs to be done at any given moment. It is the helmsman, the control room and responsible for controlling emotions and therefore the limbic system.

The limbic system is the 'emotional brain'. It is the location of the amygdala, which mainly processes negative emotions, and the nucleus accumbens, which is involved in the experience of positive emotions¹⁰ and is part of the brain's own reward system. The reward system is responsible for controlling motivation with the aim of obtaining a reward. It focuses on pleasure and happiness.

You can imagine the prefrontal cortex as the brake and gearbox and the reward system as the accelerator pedal. A healthy, mature brain shifts gear according to the situation; it accelerates, but then also brakes.

The prefrontal cortex lags behind the development of the limbic system from the outset. In the teenage years, the limbic system takes over more control.¹¹ Or to put it another way: in adolescents,



the brake and gearbox are still a little clunky, but the accelerator is in perfect working order. Adolescents are attracted to anything that the reward system categorises as 'good', anything new, exciting or high-risk.

Compared to children and adults, the reward or motivation system of adolescents is extremely active. This seems paradoxical. Because they often have no motivation at all for tasks that parents consider important. But that's no surprise, because hardly anything is new, and very little is exciting at home and in school.

Teenagers are already able to assess risk correctly, which is a prefrontal cortex task. Among people of their own age, however, they tend towards high-risk behaviour.¹² This is evident, for example, in their increased consumption of alcohol, smoking, taking drugs, involvement in petty crime and unwanted pregnancies.¹³ In the lives of adolescents, what matters is less what we as parents think is good and right and more the views and expectations of their peers.

Even if we as parents find this perspective difficult to understand: in certain ways, this change makes perfect sense and is essential. Adolescents are meant to start moving their focus away from home, gradually cutting the parental umbilical cord, becoming independent and developing their own new attachments and relationships. These developmental steps are influenced by biology.

That includes the fact that the teenage body gets tired one to three hours later than everyone else, which also means that adolescents increasingly turn to their own peer group.¹⁴ While their parents are ready for bed after a tiring day, teenagers are just getting started, desperate to experience new things with their friends or find a new love in their lives. But a lack of sleep makes them unsettled, has a detrimental effect on their attention span and means that what they learn is not stored away as efficiently and is forgotten more quickly.¹⁴ This is a dilemma for our teenage children.

Dopamine – the balance must be right

But let's return for a moment to the human reward system and a substance that is crucial for motivation: dopamine. It is the chemical messenger that we all need to complete what is in front of us. How much dopamine is available to us depends mainly on what we are doing or not doing, when we are doing it and how often.

When mice are genetically modified so that they have no dopamine in their reward system, they lose the motivation to get up and eat, even if the food is less than a body length away from them. But if you put the food in their mouth, they eat it.¹⁵ Without dopamine, you even lose the motivation to do what you need to do to survive.

Everything we do to give us pleasure releases dopamine in the reward system. This includes behaviours and substances such as sugar, using screens, music, shopping, sex, alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis, cocaine and amphetamine.

Anything new also causes dopamine to be released. That applies to every new video on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and the various streaming platforms.

Exercise also activates the reward system. This is understandable, as movement was important for survival in ancient times. Physical exertion was required to hunt and kill animals, collect berries, roots and mushrooms and in the search for new sources of water. You had to move to find pleasure. Nowadays that is no longer necessary. Where in the past you had to hunt down your hunk of meat, you can now get it delivered ready to eat to your home. You can get anything you need on the internet. Without any effort.

But our brains are not programmed for that type of pleasure. They have developed in such a way that we first have to put in effort to get a small reward – and we are still wired that way.

In addition, the brain and the body are intended to be in balance. They try to create homeostasis. That's why a dopamine increase (e.g. scrolling on your smartphone) is followed by a dopamine crash (when you put your phone down).¹⁵ It is therefore extremely unhelpful to spend time on your phone just before you start studying, as

you will experience a drop in dopamine. Studying requires motivation and therefore dopamine. After a drop in dopamine, it becomes twice as difficult to make an effort.

This is a response to the stimulus, but in the wrong direction.¹⁵ If we do something that requires effort or is boring, something we don't feel like doing and would rather put off, the unpleasant feeling associated with this comes with a reduction in dopamine. But then, when the homework has been completed or the room tidied, the dopamine level goes up and therefore our mood automatically improves. That good feeling after studying is also pre-programmed.

If there is a balance between effort and pleasure, between work and reward, the dopamine level remains in balance and therefore at a healthy level. But if you are constantly being rewarded without making any effort, the brain gradually decreases the dopamine concentration. The baseline level falls. This makes us increasingly lethargic, we gradually lose interest in everything and cannot motivate ourselves to do even the simplest tasks.¹⁵ The rule 'business before pleasure' therefore has a neurobiological basis.

Serotonin – the chemical messenger for self-regulation

While dopamine tends to drive you on in the reward system (after watching one video, you usually watch another and then another ...), the neurotransmitter serotonin creates a feeling of satisfaction. Serotonin makes you calm, even-tempered and relaxed. It puts you in a good mood and eases anxiety.

Serotonin can be increased in three ways:

1. by burning fat through physical exercise;
2. through food;
3. as a result of experiencing success.

But motivating yourself to exercise, making sure that you eat a healthy and natural diet (e.g. following Dr. Kurt Mosetter's Glycoplan) and experiencing success requires one thing above all: self-regulation.¹⁶

Tips for parents

To conclude, we would like to provide a few concrete pieces of advice and tips that will help you in bringing up your children and supporting their capacity to self-regulate.

Be a role model and keep calm

Be a role model of effective self-regulation as far as possible. The behaviour of parents is crucial in how well adolescents learn to self-regulate. This is particularly important if they have a tendency towards a low capacity for self-regulation.¹⁷

As language supports self-regulation and the brain learns through repetition, you can say to yourself in advance or when a conflict is looming: 'If I get angry, I'm going to speak quietly.' 'I am going to stay friendly but firm.' or 'I'm going to wait out their frustration!'. Such formulations help to stay calm in conflict situations.^{2, 18}

You do not always have to resolve conflicts immediately either and certainly not in what are supposed to be agreeable situations, such as enjoying a meal together. It is often better to postpone the discussion until later. You could say to your child: 'Let's talk about that later.' or 'Your behaviour will have consequences. I'm going to decide by tomorrow what they should be.'¹⁸



It can also be useful to discuss such decisions in advance with a trusted person so that you can work out the best solution or consequence for the child together.¹⁸

Teaching basic skills – the executive functions

We need the executive functions all the time. Make your child aware of the role that these basic functional capacities have in learning and in life. They are crucial for learning success and essential for getting on well with friends but also in being able to show the strength to take yourself out of a situation in which you are under group pressure. Adolescents need their executive functions in difficult moments in particular. You should help them to take the right decisions and not to react impulsively.

These are the important points:

1. **Stop**
You should pause for a moment to avoid reacting on the basis of a bad impulse.
Impulse control/inhibition.
2. **Reflect**
Remember what the current situation is actually about: what did I want to do, what should I do? What was my intention? What did I agree with my parents to do in a situation like this? **Working memory.**
3. **Reset**
Adjust behaviour in line with objectives and the situation. **Cognitive flexibility.**
4. **Make a start**
Do what is needed right now. **Initiation.**
5. **Don't get distracted**
Concentrate on your task, your objective.
Focused attention/inhibition.

6. Persevere

Even if it requires effort or is boring or difficult. In this way, you develop a **willingness to try, determination, willpower and self-discipline.**

Spend time with your child – strengthen the bond

Precisely because adolescents are beginning to loosen their ties to home in this phase of their lives, it is very important for parents to maintain the bond with their teenage children, continue to care for them and make them stronger by doing so. A good way to do this is to establish rituals and fixed routines that you do together. You can set fixed times for doing certain activities together, for example, such as cooking, tidying up, family trips out, games evenings and holidays. The aim is to keep the parent-child relationship going in the teenage years so that your children are not only influenced by people of their own age, who are not always the best sources of advice, or the internet.¹⁹

As far as possible, try to spend 20 minutes every day just listening to your child, during which you are not trying to teach them anything or give them parental advice. React appreciatively to positive behaviour but follow the formula: listen more than you speak. You will be amazed by what you hear from your child and what you learn about them.²

Involve your child in setting the rules

Formulate rules for family life together, for example, on respectful treatment of one another, on your child's chores in the home, their commitment to learning at school, bedtimes and consumption of media and alcohol. It is helpful to write these rules down, hang them up somewhere prominent and discuss them at regular intervals (e.g. once a month). In this way, you can check what is working well and what needs further attention.



Leave the phone behind and do something different

Talk to your child about the links between dopamine and media consumption. If they understand what is going on in the brain

- when they reach for their phone (increase in dopamine = increase in motivation),
- when they then put it down (decrease in dopamine = drop in motivation),
- and when they use it continuously over several hours a day (fall in the dopamine baseline = lasting loss of motivation, irritability, poor mental state, disruption to sleep),

they will find it easier to limit their own media consumption.

In the case of over-consumption, it is useful to work out self-commitment strategies with your child, in which they set phone-free times for themselves and accept doing without it for that period (switching off the phone at the self-determined time, putting it in a drawer or giving it to you).¹⁵ Your child should monitor their negative feelings (withdrawal symptoms) that come from giving up their phone and learn to let those feelings pass. By exposing themselves to feelings of this sort, the feelings themselves will become increasingly less powerful, and your child will take more pleasure in everyday things.¹⁵

The aim is to switch to a moderate (average) or low use of their mobile phone and to stick to it and not slip back into over-consumption or reflexively reaching for it out of addiction.¹⁵ Make your child aware that they are developing willpower by doing this.

Below you will find screen times that correspond to moderate use. The general rule is: less is better.

10 to 12 years of age: A maximum of 45 to 60 minutes on specific days. If media are already being used in school, then do not allow any more screen time on that day.

12 to 16 years of age: A maximum of one to one-and-a-half hours, finishing at the latest by 7 pm (12 to 13-year-olds), 8 pm (14- to 15-year-olds) or 9 pm (16-year-olds).

16 to 18 years of age: Continue to set rules for screen time. A maximum of two hours a day in their free time and finishing at the latest by 10 pm.

You can check your child's use of apps, put age-appropriate settings in place (such as age approvals and data protection settings), set rules for screen time and time limits, and block inappropriate content on your child's phone under 'Settings' and then 'Screen time' or 'Digital wellbeing and parental controls'. Use this simple method to protect your child.

Finally: set a good example in this respect too and use your phone as little as possible in everyday life with your child. Leave it at home, for example, on your desk, or in your bedroom during the day. At mealtimes, screen media should be banned. The same applies to studying.

If your child allows themselves to be distracted by their mobile phone while doing homework or preparing for a test, they will need approximately 50% longer and make 50% more mistakes than if they work without distraction.²⁰ There should also be at least 30 minutes

of media-free time after completing homework or studying, too. This is the only way to consolidate the learning material properly.¹⁴ One hour before going to sleep, phones should be switched off, which means that it is not practical to use a phone as an alarm clock.

On the website of VERLAG BILDUNG plus, there are ten videos that can be accessed free of charge that teach school students about this and other interesting neurobiological and psychological findings in connection with self-regulated learning.

Out of their comfort zone – confronting your child with reality

Going to work is the basis for paying our rent, for food, for a car and for holidays.

Doing nothing won't pay for anything. Not for new trainers, the gym, the tickets for that concert or the cinema, popcorn included. In some cases, parents pay out ridiculous amounts for the latest Macs, iPads, phones, iPods and watches for their children. Learning to drive also costs a small fortune nowadays.

Everything has to be paid for and worked for in advance. Let your teenage children make a contribution to this by helping out at home and earning a little money with a holiday or part-time job for school students. This will prepare them for the next phase of their lives, reinforce their self-awareness and improve their social behaviour.

Under Section 1619 of the German Civil Code, our children are under an obligation to help us: 'As long as the child belongs to the household of its parents and is brought up or maintained by its parents, it has a duty to perform services for its parents in their household and business in a manner appropriate for its strength and its position in life.'

It should be a matter of course for your children to help around the home and earn a little money. This gives them regular opportunities to practise self-regulation and develop their willingness to work hard and determination, and they will learn to appreciate the value of what they are given or work for and treat it with greater care.

Conclusion: the importance of relaxation

Everyday life offers numerous opportunities for adolescents to try out their self-regulation skills. We should be aware of these opportunities and use them proactively. At the same time, however, free time in the evenings, at weekends and during holidays is very important. It allows recovery and regeneration. In fact, it is not only true that self-regulation can be trained like a muscle, it also true that it suffers fatigue like a muscle. Real relaxation – away from screens and multitasking – are crucial for recharging our self-regulation batteries. This applies to our children as it does to ourselves. We need stimulus-free times (without a mobile phone or the internet), enough sleep of good quality, healthy, natural nutrition, and sport and exercise to enable us to move from stress to regeneration. Body-and-mind techniques (such as meditation, mindfulness and yoga) and experiencing nature help with deep relaxation.²¹

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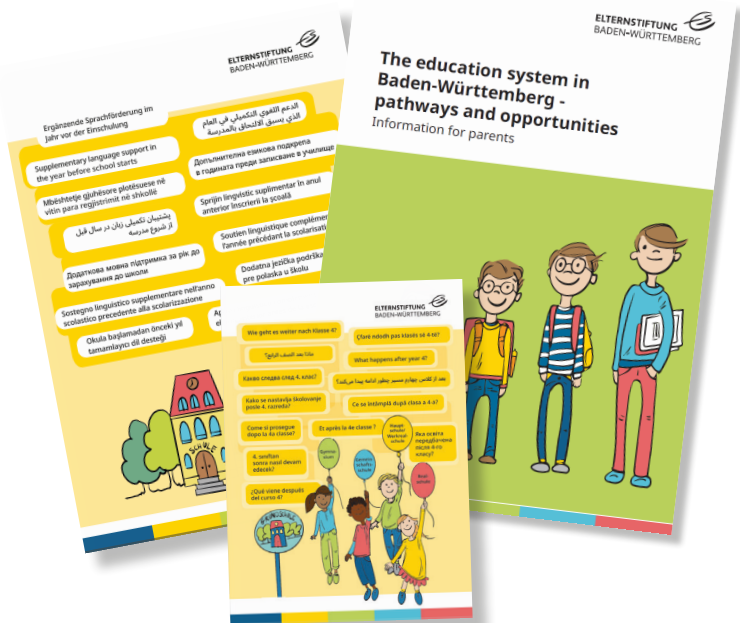
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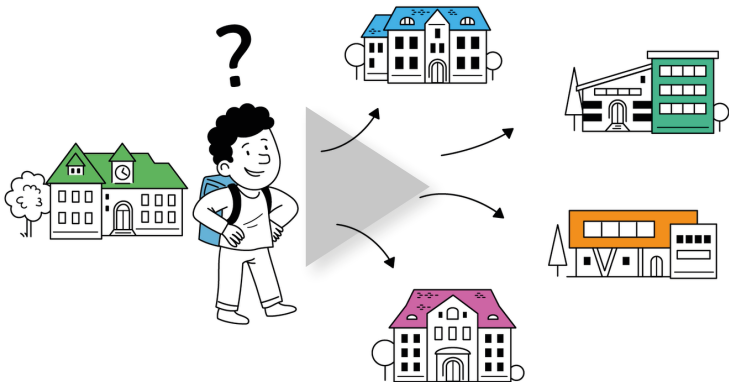
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