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Raising a self-regulated learner



If there's one skill that can set a child up for lifelong success, it's taking charge of their own learning. Dalena van der Westhuizen, cognitive development specialist, executive function skills coach and co-founder of BrainAbility, explains what a parent can do to help their child learn to regulate their own learning

Whether your child's six or 16, and in traditional schooling or homeschooling, the ability to plan, monitor and adjust their approach to learning can make all the difference. This skill, known as self-regulated learning (SRL), helps children stay motivated, overcome challenges and become independent thinkers who can navigate the demands of both academics and life with confidence.

What is SRL?

SRL is the process of actively managing one's learning by setting goals, planning strategies, monitoring progress and adapting as needed. Children who develop SRL skills don't just study harder, but smarter. They understand how they learn best, take responsibility for their progress and develop resilience when faced with setbacks.

The good news? SRL isn't an inborn talent. With the right

support, it's a skill that can be developed and strengthened over time.

The building blocks of SRL

1 Goal-setting: The power of a clear target

Children need to know what they're working towards. However, vague goals like "I want to get better at maths" don't provide much direction. Instead, encourage specific, measurable goals, such as: "I'll practise multiplication for 15 minutes every day this week." Having clear targets helps children stay focused and motivated, while allowing them to track progress and celebrate small wins along the way.

2 Planning and organisation: Working smarter, not harder

Good students don't just dive in – they plan ahead. Effective planning includes breaking tasks into manageable chunks, prioritising work and setting up a productive study space. Parents can help by teaching



children how to use checklists, planners or even simple routines to structure their study time. A well-organised approach reduces stress and boosts confidence.

3 *Monitoring and reflection: Learning to think about thinking*

One of the most powerful SRL habits is self-monitoring – teaching children to ask themselves questions like “Am I understanding this?” or “Is this study method working for me?” Reflection helps them recognise what’s effective and where they might need to adjust their approach. Journalling, discussing challenges or even reviewing mistakes can turn setbacks into valuable learning experiences.

4 *Managing emotions and motivation: Staying engaged through ups and downs*

A key part of self-regulation is managing emotions and staying motivated even when things get tough. Encouraging a mindset where mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn can help children develop resilience. Simple strategies like positive self-talk (“I can improve with practice”) or breaking tasks into smaller steps can prevent frustration from turning into discouragement.

5 *Adapting strategies: Finding what works best*

Successful students are flexible

students. Sometimes a learning approach that worked in one situation may not be effective in another. Self-regulated learners recognise when they need to try a different method, whether it’s rereading a difficult passage, watching an educational video or seeking help from a teacher. Encouraging children to experiment with different study techniques and strategies, such as summarising information, using flashcards or teaching the material to someone else, builds problem-solving skills and helps them discover how they learn best.

How can parents support SRL?

Helping your child develop SRL skills doesn’t mean doing the work for them. It means guiding and supporting them in building independence. Here are some practical ways to do that at home:

- **Encourage self-reflection:**

Instead of simply asking: “Did you do your homework?”, try asking: “What was the most interesting thing you learnt today?” This shifts the focus from task completion to deeper thinking.

- **Allow mistakes to be learning opportunities:** Resist the urge to correct every error immediately. Giving children the chance to problem-solve on their own fosters resilience and critical thinking.

- **Teach time management and self-discipline:** Breaking tasks into smaller steps, setting

realistic deadlines and taking regular breaks can improve focus and prevent procrastination.

The “plan-do-review”

method: A practical exercise for building SRL at home

Before starting homework or a study session, have your child:

- **Plan:** Identify what needs to be done and set a (realistic) goal.
- **Do:** Work on the task while self-monitoring (eg checking understanding, adjusting focus).
- **Review:** Reflect on what worked well and what could be improved for next time.

This structured approach fosters independent learning and continuous improvement. It also encourages self-awareness and problem-solving, helping children take ownership of their learning journey.

The long-term impact

Developing SRL habits isn’t just about academic success – it’s about equipping children with lifelong skills such as problem-solving, resilience and adaptability. While these skills take time to build, the small, consistent efforts you make today can lead to significant benefits in the future.

By fostering independence, curiosity and a love of learning, you’re giving your child a gift that extends far beyond the classroom.