

# Babies' Self-Regulation

## Taking a Broad Perspective



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Two mothers of young babies and a friend of theirs are talking. The first mother starts telling the other mother what a “good baby” she has.

“He almost never cries,” she says proudly. “He’s so easy!”

“Are you ever lucky!” says the other mother. “I can’t believe how hard my little guy is to live with. He is in constant motion and goes through loud screaming periods. Why are our babies so different, and will mine be like this his whole life?” she wonders out loud.

Their friend, a student in early childhood education at the local college, responds to the second mother: “It’s a matter of self-regulation—that’s the difference. I’m studying about that in my class, and when your baby learns to self-regulate, he’ll be easier too.”

**It’s hard to say** if the differences in babies’ behaviors come from self-regulation alone. It’s even harder to answer whether these two babies will continue in their patterns for life. Labeling one as an “easy baby” or the other as a “difficult baby” can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when babies live up to their label. Believing that something is so can have an influence on making it so.

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**Enid Elliot and Janet Gonzalez-Mena**

It’s also hard to say why babies are so different, because many factors come into play. Is it temperament that makes them behave the way they do? Are physical issues involved, such as colic? Is it genetics? Maybe there are continuing effects from prenatal or birth conditions.

What about home life? Family and community stability can play a role. There are the drastic stresses some babies and families endure brought on by illness, poverty, homelessness, food insecurity and malnutrition, substance abuse, and lack of safety. All of these factors can affect the baby and the baby’s relationships. In addition, there is self-regulation. What is self-regulation, and what might it have to do with these two babies?

### The development of self-regulation

Self-regulation is a long, slow process of development and relationship building, which in these two young babies hasn’t yet progressed very far. It can be defined as “the ability to monitor and manage one’s thinking, attention, feelings, and behavior . . .” (Thompson 2009, 33).

At the start of life, with the help of reflexes, children begin to regulate physical functions, such as their heartbeat, breathing, focusing the eyes, sucking, and swallowing. These are part of self-regulation. As babies grow, develop, and learn, they also gain “the capacity to pay attention, express feelings, and control impulses” (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000, 26).

Self-regulation is a complex process that involves coordinating various systems of the body and mind, including feelings. It’s not only about emotions but also about cognition. Self-regulation has an impact on social development,



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influencing how babies and toddlers get along with others. Through self-regulation, babies and toddlers learn to pay attention, concentrate, and connect with others. Children learn how and when to inhibit impulses, channel emotional energy, and solve problems as they discover how to change their actions to get what they want.

### Caregivers are partners in helping babies self-regulate

Self-regulation is not something babies learn/develop all by themselves—they need partners. Having attachments to family and others in the caregiving circle and the community surrounding them provides babies with learning opportunities for monitoring their emotions and expression. Within these relationships, babies begin to explore and understand their movements and emotions as people respond in varying degrees to soothe, encourage, or relate to them.

As a baby responds to the people in her or his world and the world, in turn, responds to the baby, dialogue begins. Relationships with others often motivate us to change our actions, learn about our feelings, and modify our emotions. Experiencing relationships of trust and security makes it easier for children to develop effective strategies within their families and in other communities.

What we do or don't do as caregivers makes a difference in how the process of self-regulation unfolds for children. In partnership with adults,

children learn how to regulate or change their behavior to suit the situation. For example, if we respond with anger to a child's anger or with impatience to a child's sadness, children don't learn to respect these feelings. Our calm response to children's sadness and anger helps children accept these feelings and find ways to live with them. Sadness at a parent's or caregiver's leaving is a natural feeling, and children can learn to be sad and find their way to being comfortable with this feeling. "My grandma is leaving now and I feel sad and a bit lost, but I feel better if I sit with a friend or read a book or play with the water."

Of course, attachment at home is primary, but infants and toddlers also need to form attachments in child care (Mangione & Signer n.d.). Attachment occurs when caregivers learn to read a baby's signals and become attuned to the baby's needs. For example, caregivers learn what it takes to soothe each baby. All of these behaviors

and more contribute to a baby's understanding of what it means to moderate desires, emotions, and behavior.

In this article, we also reflect on the work of an important teacher—Magda Gerber, who was a Los Angeles infant specialist originally from Hungary—from whom we learned in the 1970s and 1980s. Her work continues today through Resources for Infant Educators (RIE), the organization she established. Gerber's wide variety of caregiving behaviors supports what brain research today is telling us about self-regulation. In the following sampling of caregiver behaviors that support self-regulation, many come directly from Magda.

### Which caregiving practices help babies self-regulate?

Magda Gerber didn't use the term *self-regulation* in her teaching, but in looking back now, the practices she taught fit very well.

**Provide predictability.** When life is chaotic and unpredictable, it's hard for a baby to anticipate a situation and use the abilities she or he may have to self-regulate. A calm, peaceful environment with a clear routine helps. This is the overall picture, but here is a specific example.

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Magda would approach a baby from the front so as not to surprise her. She would tell the baby what was going to happen: “I’m going to pick you up now.” Then she would wait for a reaction before continuing. She showed us over and over how even young babies will indicate that they know what’s next and respond accordingly. They learn to predict and respond! It’s a very simple practice, but think how many times caregivers approach from behind and scoop up a child up without warning. Imagine how unsettling this can be!



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**Help children develop awareness and acceptance of their feelings.** Becoming aware of and accepting our own feelings lets us be comfortable with them, be able to talk about them, and learn to modify them. We are less likely to stuff our uncomfortable feelings inside ourselves or try to make them go away.

Feelings are useful—they contain energy that can be helpful or even valuable! Feelings give us messages; they are a form of communication. The way we respond to a baby’s crying—whether we rock, sing, soothe, or leave the baby alone to calm herself—indicates acceptance. In accepting the baby’s feelings, we remain calm because we know that people feel distress or sadness at times—it’s a part of life.

Self-regulation isn’t about getting rid of feelings. That’s a simplistic notion of a complex process. But here’s an example of what Magda taught. Say a baby’s needs have all been met, but he is still crying. In Magda’s mind, it was okay to cry. Crying is an expression of a feeling. She didn’t suggest leaving the baby alone to cry it out, but instead she taught caregivers to remain and offer a calm, stabilizing presence. At times the caregiver’s calmness alone can soothe the baby.

Many caregivers may feel distressed at the baby’s distress. Their response is to try to make the feelings go away. Magda’s message to caregivers was to let babies work through those feelings with a composed, accepting partner. Her message for the baby was that feelings are okay, even distressing ones.

**Encourage infants and toddlers to focus and pay attention.** Caregiving times are perfect for practicing this skill, with the help of a caregiver who understands how. Magda’s approach to these self-regulation skills comes directly from Emmi Pikler, her mentor, colleague, and friend in Budapest (Gonzalez-Mena 2004).

Both Magda and Pikler taught caregivers to involve infants and toddlers in caregiving routines. Rather than distracting babies while being diapered, they included them as part of the diapering procedure by helping them focus on the process instead of on a toy or a mobile overhead. They talked about what they were going to do each step of the way rather than entertaining the baby with unrelated chatter. After each explanation of what would happen next, they waited for the baby’s response rather than quickly moving on.

Treated this way, babies learn to pay attention to their own bodies and what’s happening. The caregiver enlists the baby’s cooperation and creates a partnership and develops a relationship. This engagement is the beginning of a dialogue/relationship that develops between caregiver and baby—give-and-take communication.

During playtime both Pikler and Magda taught caregivers to observe and to appreciate babies’ natural, self-initiated movements, which occur when babies are in positions where they are free to move. By being present for the baby’s movements and intentions, caregivers indicate they are carefully listening to the baby.

Movement is an important part of self-regulation as babies learn how their bodies work. They learn balance, a skill we all work with our whole lives. They learn this on their own—no help needed. “The freely moving infant is constantly learning,” says Anna Tardos, Pikler’s daughter and the present director of the Pikler Institute (2007). The freely moving infant learns to pay attention—to the caregiver meeting his needs and also to his own body and how the muscle systems work. Within the first month after birth, babies even-

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usually learn to explore and pay attention first to their hands and then to simple play objects they can manipulate.

When adults believe babies have short attention spans, they tend to change the environment or do something to distract or entertain the child because of that belief. As a result, they work against enhancing the natural attention span of children free to follow their own initiatives in learning. When caregivers pay close attention, they can observe and appreciate the efforts of the baby. And the baby learns that the dialogue continues with the adult listening and seeing their interest and efforts.

**Allow infants and toddlers to learn they are capable of solving their own problems.** If adults don't rush in with a solution when a young child gets stuck on a problem she wants to solve, chances are the child will find a way that will be more truly her own. Of course, if the baby gets too stuck and is either going to give up or fall apart emotionally, moving in with a bit of scaffolding—a small suggestion of something to try—may well keep her working on it. Adults who observe closely can offer an idea that helps the baby continue in the direction that feels right for her.

Sometimes we adults are a little too helpful, and young ones learn to look to us instead of working to solve their own problems. Magda was a champion of letting children work things out, even when they get frustrated. This next practice is an example of a caregiving behavior that encourages babies to stay on task, a goal of self-regulation.

**Keep developmentally appropriate expectations in developmentally appropriate environments.** When caregivers are clear about what children are capable of and the kind of environments that nurture and enrich their experiences, babies have opportunities to solve problems. This is an ever-changing job as infants and toddlers develop, grow, and learn.

**Help infants and toddlers understand perspectives other than their own.** A calm voice saying, "Nathan doesn't like it when you grab his toy," helps the child begin to understand the feelings of another person, an important part of self-regulation. A young child does not have the ability to inhibit her urge immediately the next time a child appears with a toy she wants. But self-control will eventually come if adults keep encouraging children to tune in to each other's feelings, step in to stop any physical harm, and help babies find a solution that fits their particular situation.

**Support infants and toddlers in handling prohibitions.** Being thwarted in one's desires is tough. Time-honored practices work well here and support self-regulation. One approach is to redirect a child's behavior so that her energy isn't stifled but instead goes in another direction. "Throw this soft ball, not the truck," said in an even, positive voice, is an example. Another related approach is giving children choices: "I can't let you bite Evan, but you can bite this teething ring or this washcloth."

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## Cultural perspectives on self-regulation

Taking a cross-cultural perspective, it's important to realize that the term *self* attached to any word triggers feelings in some people, who react to what they consider too strong an emphasis on individualism. For families whose childrearing stresses interdependence over independence, the term *self-regulation* might suggest a predetermined, defined goal for this control centered within the individual. In some families/communities, the idea of leaving control up to the individual doesn't make sense. For those who view control this way, children belong to everybody and everybody is on alert to curb unacceptable behavior. Community pressure on individuals is an expected and important aspect of getting along—not only for children but also for adults.

Culture plays a role in how children do or don't learn to self-regulate emotional expression. Some babies are encouraged to show all kinds of feelings, while other babies' emo-

tions are considered disruptive to others. Each culture may define emotions and their regulation differently. What is appropriate in one family or culture may not be acceptable in another.

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Babies learn early what their crying or their cooing signals to others, and they shape their communication accordingly. Each caregiver and each family will come to the relationship with their babies with their own perceptions of what is appropriate. Understanding that there are different responses to emotional and social situations helps us develop a broader perspective on self-regulation.

## Conclusion

What can we conclude about the two babies in the scenario opening this article? Without more information, we don't know much about their abilities to self-regulate at this early stage. Perhaps each mother has a different expectation or perception of or for her baby. Our expectations play a role as well as our own histories and understandings of babies.

In addition, we don't know about the temperamental match or mismatch of their mothers, fathers, other family members, or caregivers. Even these can make a difference. We hope both the families and other caregivers know about caregiving practices that support babies' development of self-regulation. How well these two babies manage the various systems of body and mind, including feelings, will to some extent depend on the adults who partner with them and the dialogue in which they engage.

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