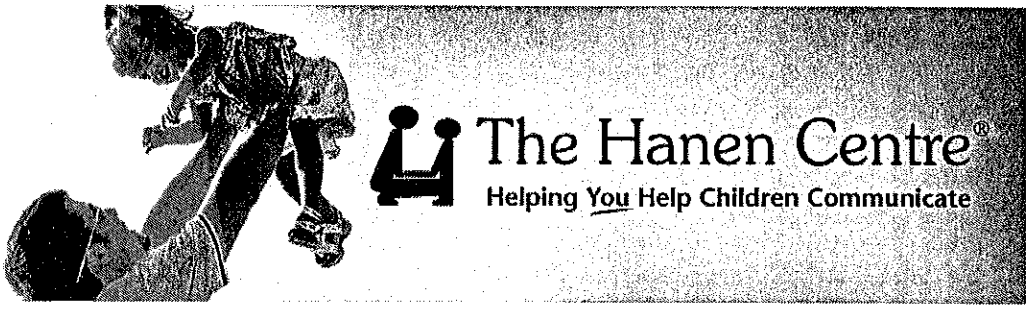

What Is Behaviour Regulation? And What Does It Have To Do With Language Development?

By Lauren Lowry
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Imagine the following scenario:

After a long day at work, you head to the grocery store. You've finished your shopping and proceed to the check-out area, where you choose a line and wait for a while. After several minutes you decide to switch lines, thinking you've noticed a faster cashier. Now in your new line, you wait...and wait...and wait...soon realizing that this new line up is no faster than your original line. You decide to check your phone for email messages and clear out your inbox. When that's complete, you begin to fidget, becoming impatient. It's finally your turn to unload your groceries onto the conveyor belt. Once unloaded, you realize that they are not moving along the belt because the customer ahead of you is arguing about the price of one of her items. The cashier calls for a price check. When that problem is resolved, the cashier finally greets you, saying "Hello, how are you today?" Your response: "I'm fine thanks, how are you?"

Interestingly, most of us would respond like this, instead of providing a more accurate answer to the cashier's question, such as "Well, I'm frustrated", or "This store needs to hire more cashiers", or "I've been waiting here for 15 minutes!" What is it exactly, that allows us to tolerate such scenarios without completely losing it?

It's called behaviour regulation.

What is Behaviour Regulation?

Behaviour regulation, sometimes also known as "self-regulation", refers to our ability to:

- use self-control to behave in appropriate ways – this may mean controlling our impulses
  so that we stop doing something (such as drinking alcohol) or it may mean doing something, even if we don't want to (being polite to our manager, even though s/he has been really unfair to us).
- manage our energy, emotions, attention and behaviour in ways that are socially acceptable and help us to achieve our goals [1]
- stay calm, focused, and alert [2]
- deal with things that stress our system, like too much noise, fatigue, challenging situations or tasks, or distractions [1]

Our ability to regulate or manage our behaviour allows us to focus when there are distractions, pay attention to the most important information, take turns, wait, follow rules, adapt to new situations, do what is socially expected, suppress outbursts of anger, and take on challenges. Behaviour regulation develops gradually during childhood. This process doesn't happen overnight, and some children are able to cope with daily stresses more easily than others.

A child's ability to regulate his behaviour affects his later development. This was highlighted in a famous experiment about self-regulation [3], in which 4 year old children were given one marshmallow, and told they could have the one marshmallow immediately or several marshmallows if they waited for the adult to come back into the room. Around 30% of the children were able to wait, and these children did better at school and university later in life, showed less antisocial behaviour, and were less likely to use drugs [1].

The Connection Between Behaviour Regulation and Language

There is a strong connection between behaviour regulation and language. Studies show that:

- toddlers with bigger vocabularies develop better self-regulation skills [4]
- preschool children with better behaviour regulation skills have better early literacy, vocabulary, and math skills [5]

In studies of children with language delays, researchers found that:

- **children with better behaviour regulation learn more vocabulary during speech therapy than children with poorer behaviour regulation** – this could be because the children with better behaviour regulation can pay attention better and persist more with challenges during speech therapy sessions, which allows them to benefit more from therapy [6].

- **toddlers who are late to talk are at risk for behaviour regulation difficulties in kindergarten** [7]
- **children with language delays have poorer behaviour regulation in kindergarten than children with typically developing language** [7] – this could be because children with less language skills have fewer ways to express themselves and explain their emotions.

Due to the connection between behaviour regulation and language, it's important for parents, and especially for parents of children with language difficulties, to learn ways to encourage their child's ability to regulate his or her behaviour. This will help the child benefit from speech and language therapy, interact with family members and other children, and learn at school.

How Can Parents Promote Their Child's Behaviour Regulation Skills?

Helping children learn to regulate their behaviour isn't about helping them learn to sit still, comply with directions, and control themselves. It's about providing an environment where children can make choices, understand expectations, feel relaxed, burn off steam, and have energy left to face challenges in their daily life.

Here are some simple tips that will help promote your child's behaviour regulation:

- **Carefully observe your child** – Stuart Shanker, a professor at York University in Toronto who does research on self-regulation, suggests "being a detective" [1]. This means trying to figure out the demands placed on the child, factors that help the child stay calm and alert, what the child does to control himself, and what causes a child to become under- or over-stimulated.

> Observe your child's reactions to different situations and activities. Once you know your child's stressors, you can try to minimize them, and create an environment in which your child can remain calm and focused.

- **Demonstrate self-regulation yourself** – During everyday activities, use words, actions, and "self-talk" that demonstrate behaviour regulation [8]. Self-talk is language that verbalizes your thoughts and feelings.

When playing a board game, you can demonstrate how to control your impulse to go first, saying: "I'll let you pick the game this time since I picked last time." If a toy is broken, you can demonstrate how to manage your frustration: "Ooh, that's disappointing. I really wanted to play with that toy with you. Hmmm....let's see if we can find something else to play with." Or if an activity is challenging, you can demonstrate problem solving and persisting: "Hmmm...this is tricky. What if we try just doing this part first?"

- **Teach your child words to express his thoughts and emotions** – This will give him some tools to help regulate his behaviour.

Some simple, early developing words to describe emotions include "happy", "mad", "scared" and "sad". For children with more language, you can model more complicated words like "feel", "think", "upset", or "calm". You can use these words to describe your child's thoughts and emotions during everyday life. For example, if your child is upset at a sudden change in routine, you can put words to what he is thinking, saying "You seem upset because we had to change our plan."

- **Create routines and make expectations clear** – Children have less control over their behaviour and emotions when expectations are unclear or they don't know what is coming next.

Using schedules, lists, warnings about changes, timers, or any other tools that provide children with routine and predictability can help minimize stress and help children understand what is coming next [9].

- **Encourage play with other children** – If your child has difficulty regulating his behaviour, plan play dates with a child who has good behaviour regulation skills. In this way, your child can learn from the role modeling of the other child [8].

Plan play dates with a child who is good at taking turns, waiting, negotiating rules, and playing fairly.

- **Help your child play imaginatively** – During pretend play, children practice many aspects of behaviour regulation. In order to take on a pretend role (e.g. pretend to be a doctor), they need to suppress their natural reactions and instead imagine a doctor's reactions. Children need to make decisions and follow rules during pretend play, including deciding which toys to use and which children will take on certain roles. Pretending also involves planning and acting out different emotions and scenarios, as well as their consequences [10].

Encourage your child's pretend play by encouraging role play (pretend to be a fire fighter or waitress) and pretending with toys (pretend to drive the toy cars to the car wash). Involve other children in the pretending whenever possible.

- **Follow your child's lead** – Encouraging a child's interests during play and other activities will increase his focus, attention, and motivation [1].

Following your child's lead involves abandoning your agenda and observing your child's interests. When you let your child lead the conversation and the play, you will find that your interactions last longer and your child pays closer attention to what you say and do.

- **Play games with rules** – The ability to follow rules, set rules, and apply rules to oneself is all part of the development of self-regulation [11].

Play games with simple rules at home, like chase, Hide and Seek, Go Fish, or simple board games.

- **Encourage physical play** – Stuart Shanker suggests limiting screen time and increasing outdoor and physical play [12]. Lack of exercise can be a "stressor" to your child's system, and increasing physical play and activities can improve his ability to regulate his behaviour.

People games are a great way to encourage physical play – these are physical games played with people (no toys), such as chase, Ring Around the Rosie, or horsie rides.

- **Let children make choices and set goals** – Providing children with choices allows them some control over their environment. And helping children set goals for themselves also helps develop their self-control [13].

Children can set goals about how to spend the summer holiday or a Saturday afternoon, plan activities for an upcoming playdate, or choose what they are going to wear the next day.

By minimizing the stress and demands in children's everyday lives, and creating an environment in which children can be calm, alert and focused, children will have enough energy to learn from their surroundings and manage everyday challenges [2]. Furthermore, by encouraging children's behaviour regulation, we promote their language abilities and potentially their later success at school.

For more information about self-regulation, visit the Canadian Self-Regulation Initiative (CSRI) website.

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How to Handle Picky Eaters

by Nicci Micco

Wondering how to get your child to eat? Here are some no-nag ways to outsmart a picky eater.

As a baby, my son, Julian, was what you'd call "a good eater." He took to nursing like a champ. He loved purees from his first bite of pears—and ate pretty much anything we offered: beets, parsnips, rutabagas. Finger foods were a hit. Bits of salmon, squash, beans—he ate them all. I was proud. And then I was humbled. Right around Jules's second birthday, he stopped eating spinach. He quit carrots. He still ate corn—but only if it was off the cob.

"Picky eating is a normal rite of passage," says Jill Castle, R.D., a pediatric nutrition expert in Nashville and a mom of four. "All toddlers at some point demonstrate some level of pickiness." Fortunately, fussy eating is usually a fleeting stage (true for Jules, who, now 3, eats mostly anything). The thing is, your kid's dissing of what you're dishing up rarely has anything to do with the food itself. Knowing what's behind it, though, can help you push through a finicky phase much faster.

Reason your child's refusing

Two words—Miss Independent.

What's happening

If "the orange one" is the typical answer you get when you ask your child whether she wants to wear the red or the blue shirt, are you really surprised when she scoffs at what you're serving for dinner?

Work with it

The "polite one bite" rule is great, but leave it at that, says Castle: "The goal is not to get them to eat the broccoli *today* but to help them actually like the broccoli long-term." Susan Miller of Franklin Lakes, NJ, employed this strategy when feeding her sons as toddlers. "I made sure there was at least one thing on their plates I knew they'd eat," she says, "but they had to taste the other foods, too. If they didn't like what they

tried, fine, but what eventually happened is that, having been exposed to a wide variety of flavors, my sons now eat almost everything."

But when you've got a kid who refuses to eat anything on her plate, anxiety often kicks in, leading you to make desperate offers of healthy staples you know she'll like: "How about a bowl of cereal?" or "Let me get you a container of yogurt." Instead, consider giving her some control over the menu. At my house, make-your-own-burrito nights are a hit. I put out bowls of fillings—rice, beans, shredded cheese and diced avocado—and let Jules create his own culinary masterpiece. Giving him the opportunity to "make" his own dinner gets him excited and eager to eat up.

Reason he's refusing

It really does taste "yucky" to him.

What's happening

As humans, we're designed to prefer sweet foods and dislike bitter ones. Sweet equals survival—think breast milk—and bitter may mean something's toxic. Some foods might register as a big "yuck" with your child because he actually has more taste buds than you do (we lose them as we age), so the flavor of foods is amplified for little ones. Your child could also be genetically wired to be more sensitive to bitter foods, as research clearly shows some kids are.

Work with it

You've no doubt heard that it can take 10 or even 15 tries before a child will accept a new food, so keep presenting (but not pushing) the options, says Laura Jana, M.D., coauthor of *Food Fights* and a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics. Stack the odds in your favor by preparing foods in ways that may be "easier" to eat: Roasting vegetables, for example, brings out their natural sweetness. "And sour counteracts bitter," says Katie Webster, a recipe developer and mom of two in Richmond, VT. "So I add lemon juice and zest to broccoli, Brussels sprouts, zucchini and green beans."

Also try switching things up: Serve raw those veggies your child shuns when cooked instead (as long as they're not a choking hazard), and vice versa. The problem may be texture—or even temperature, says dietitian

Melissa Halas-Liang, R.D., a mom and founder of superkidsnutrition.com: "A lot of kids who don't like cooked peas will eat them frozen, right out of the bag."

Reason your child's refusing

She's just not hungry right now.

What's happening

Young kids can seem finicky simply because "after that first year, growth levels out a bit and appetite isn't quite the driver anymore," says Castle. Days of awesome eating can be followed by ones when it seems as if your child is following some sort of trendy fast.

Work with it

If you're worried your child's not eating enough but her growth rate is on target, according to her doctor, "your perception of how much she should be having may be a bit off," says Dr. Jana. Keep in mind that a serving for young children is a tablespoon per year of age—basically, a bite or two of the heaping helping of peas you may have piled on her plate.

Use your kid's appetite to your advantage to introduce a new food. "At dinner, we start our kids off with a couple of bites of the food they're least likely to eat—usually veggies—and save their favorite stuff for last," says Ashley Renz on Facebook. "Our theory is that they're so hungry when they sit down, they'll happily eat whatever is on their plates, getting in the healthy stuff first."

Reason he's refusing

Dinnertime is just too rigid.

What's happening

Getting a kid to try a new food is hard enough when he's in the mood to eat. When he resists even coming to the table, forget about it. "It's probably unrealistic to think that your child will sit for much more than ten to fifteen minutes," says Halas-Liang. Yes, meals with little ones can often be chaotic, but they're worth it. Eating

dinner as a family may help kids be less fussy about food, suggests research from Loughborough University in the United Kingdom.

Work with it

Entice your child to the table by making family dinners fun. "Rolling out a meal in three phases keeps my kids engaged," says Holly Tedesco, a mom of two young kids in Forest Hills, NY. "I'll offer a glass of milk, and a piece of cheese and olives on a plate to start. Then comes grilled-cheese triangles with a side of pears. The third course is a handful of sliced grapes. It's like serving tapas, but it keeps them eating." Also consider what time you serve dinner. Melissa Hourihan, a Lancaster, MA, mom of four kids all under the age of 6, swears by the Early-Bird Special strategy. "Dinner is between five and five-thirty. Anytime later and it's bound to be a battle because the kids are tired, cranky and much more reluctant to try something new."

Reason she's refusing

What you're serving is booor-ing (no offense).

What's happening

"Research shows that kids will eat more fruits and vegetables when they're presented in visually interesting ways," says Halas-Liang. Giving foods catchy names seems to boost their appeal, too. Researchers at Cornell University found that preschoolers ate twice as many carrots when they were called "X-ray vision carrots" versus "carrots." Go figure!

Work with it

Encourage imaginative rebranding. Halas-Liang's daughter took to cauliflower after dubbing it "snowpuffs," and Dr. Jana's son was most excited when dinner was "Ryan's Lasagna." Pull kids into menu planning and meal prep, too. "My kids love looking at cookbooks and food magazines like Bon Appétit," says Nancy Tringali Piho, author of *My Two-Year-Old Eats Octopus: Raising Children Who Love to Eat Everything.* "We sit together and talk about what it is and how good it must be." Flip through the books on your shelves and tell your child he can pick anything he'd like to make from them.