

Policy Brief from Research to Real World: Linking Policy, Practice, and Philanthropy

Laying a Foundation for Academic, Social & Emotional Competence: Promoting Effortful Control

Think back to your school days when you were required to sit still, pay attention, raise your hand before speaking. Remember the playground where you played tag without getting too rough or walked away when someone made you mad? That was your effortful control at work.

Effortful control, a core aspect of self-regulation, has been shown to predict academic, social, and emotional success in both typical and at-risk children. In fact, it is a more robust predictor of early academic and social success than early verbal skills, and predicts school and adult success above the effects of family socioeconomic status and IQ. For at-risk children, having strong effortful control serves as a protective factor, reducing the adverse impact of risk factors such as dangerous neighborhoods, family conflict, or negative parenting.

What is Effortful Control?

Effortful control is an individual's ability to act purposefully including controlling thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. For children growing up in poverty or in stressful situations, development of effortful control is often compromised. These early disruptions can have long-term and wide-spread effects on a child's academic, social and emotional outcomes reaching into adulthood.

Early childhood is a key developmental period to learn effortful control. During this time parents, families, educators and school settings can play central roles in promoting the development of effortful control and self-regulation.

Parents, families, teachers, classroom programs, policymakers, and philanthropists can promote effortful control using research-based recommendations (see reverse).

Poverty diverts the development of Effortful Control:

- Poverty affects 20% of U.S. children
- Early experiences of poverty have lasting and widespread impact reaching into adulthood.
- Children who grow up in poverty are likely to show lower effortful control skills.
- Promoting effortful control skills during the birth-to-5 period can help bolster a child's academic, social and emotional success.

What YOU can do to promote Effortful Control:

Policy/Advocacy Professionals

Establishing a connection between policies and investments that make a positive difference on children's development is most powerful and effective when based in research that can help explain the 'why' and 'how' of what parents, caregivers, and teachers see every day. –Leslie Dozono, Children's Alliance

- Programs that target the most at-risk children will have the greatest impact on kindergarten readiness and life skills. Research on effortful control shows children who receive early interventions have better academic gains and develop effortful control skills at greater rates.
- Funding and resources should focus on social-emotional skills in addition to academic programs. Studies have found that children with strong effortful control skills have greater academic gains.

Practitioners and Child Care Providers

I will encourage our children's librarians to promote effortful control. One technique we will use is to model scaffolding during storytime. We will model how parents can ask questions about a story and then elaborate on the child's response; this encourages greater understanding and interest, and promotes literacy skills, as well as effortful control. – Angela Morris, Librarian, North Central Regional Library

- Program developers should consider 1) key milestones at each developmental period, and 2) continuity from infancy through early childhood and on to the school-age years. This continuity of support will help at-risk children develop the self-regulation skills they need to succeed.
- Parenting and classroom-based programs should be coordinated to develop the same skills in parents and teachers. This will amplify their effects on children's development. Programs should provide support for parents, teachers, and parent-teacher communication to obtain maximum benefit.
- Parenting programs that promote scaffolding and parental self-regulation will have the greatest impact on children's effortful control. Scaffolding reflects parents',

caregivers' and teachers' ability to "step in and step out" of situations, provide guidance and structure when a child needs it to successfully navigate a situation, and also support children's independence and autonomy to facilitate their self-regulation and self-confidence.

- Child care providers, librarians, and others working with children can intentionally create environments that promote social-emotional skills, i.e. create structured, quiet spaces, allow autonomy, provide books on social-emotional skills, provide welcoming spaces for parents and caregivers, etc. This helps to promote parent-child bonding and enforce skills such as scaffolding.

Parents and Primary Caregivers

- Parents can promote effortful control with children through scaffolding of social-emotional skills (i.e. taking turns, modeling flexibility, playing with children in age appropriate ways, playing games that promote control such as Red-light, Green-light and Simon Says).
- Provide guidance and structure but also support independence and autonomy when children work through challenging emotional, social or learning situations.

Philanthropists

Philanthropists should support the whole child, including social-emotional development. Investing in programs that develop and enhance effortful control pays off – children are more resilient, able to navigate stressful and difficult situations, and succeed in school and life. Sarah Borgida, Foundation for Early Learning

- Funders can invest in social-emotional programs that take a developmental approach, supporting the development of milestones at key developmental periods, providing children necessary skills for school and life.
- Grantmakers should increase their awareness and knowledge about high-quality programs that focus on social-emotional skills for children growing up in poverty.