

Regulating the Teenage Mind

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ACTIVITIES TO HELP TEENS SET GOALS, STAY ORGANIZED, AND KEEP THEMSELVES ON TRACK

BY [BARI WALSH](#), ON NOVEMBER 12, 2014 10:07 AM



Teenagers don't yet possess the executive function skills of adults, but they probably need those skills just as much as adults do, or more. They have to manage the increasingly complex demands and fast-flying deadlines of school and extracurricular commitments, they have to think abstractly about moral and ethical dilemmas big and small, and they have to make decisions about personal responsibility and safety, among other daily challenges.

The good news is that the adolescent brain is exceptionally malleable, according to researchers at the [Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#). As in the [preschool years](#), there is a window of opportunity in adolescence when capacity spikes and parents and teachers can actively encourage the growth of self-regulation skills, which are increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of long-term success and happiness.

The Center on the Developing Child recently released [a practical collection of activities and resources](#) aimed at helping educators enhance executive function at all ages. Below, suggested strategies for encouraging teens to flex their self-regulatory muscles — excerpted from a chapter of the guide that can be [downloaded individually here](#).

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SETTING GOALS, PLANNING, AND MONITORING PROGRESS

- Encourage teens to identify something specific, and meaningful, that they want to accomplish. Start with simpler goals, like getting a driver's license or saving to buy a new laptop, before moving on to larger goals like applying for college.
- Help teens develop short- and long-term plans for steps to reach their goals. Identify problems that might arise and encourage teens to plan for those.
- Help teens root out counterproductive habits or impulsive changes by reminding them to periodically monitor their behavior to see whether they are doing what they planned and whether the plans are working.

TOOLS FOR SELF-MONITORING

- Have teens talk themselves through the steps of a difficult activity or mentally narrate what is happening. Self-talk can bring thoughts and actions into consciousness and can help teens identify negative thinking or behavior patterns.
- Help teens recognize the lessons of difficult experiences or failure. Help them consider what went wrong and what might be done differently next time.
- Help teens become more mindful about the effects of interruptions, particularly from electronic devices. Rather than multitasking, work on ways to prioritize tasks.
- Talk with teens about the motivations of other people, helping them to develop hypotheses about why someone acted in a certain way and what an alternative interpretation might be.
- Encourage teens to keep a journal, which can foster self-reflection, awareness, and planning.

A TEEN'S GUIDE TO STUDY SKILLS

- Break a project down into smaller pieces.
- Make reasonable plans (and a timeline) for completing each piece.
- Self-monitor while working; set a timer, and when it goes off, ask yourself whether you are understanding and completing the assignment the way you planned.

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- Set aside time for focused attention, with no distractions or devices.
- Use memory tools — mnemonic devices or written notes.
- Keep a calendar of deadlines.
- After completing a project, pause to consider what went well and what didn't.
- Think about what you learned from assignments that weren't completed well.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Age of Opportunity: Lessons From the New Science of Adolescence](#). A webinar (free and open to the public) on November 14, 2014 (will be archived), 1–2 p.m. (ET) or 10–11 a.m. (PT). Featuring [Laurence Steinberg](#), Distinguished University Professor of Psychology, Temple University, and moderated by [Kevin King](#), FOI affiliate and associate professor, University of Washington.
- [Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence](#)

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