Self-Regulation: Setting the Course for Success

We all want students to succeed—in school and in life. Research from 2015 tells us socially and emotionally competent students are more likely to experience this success.[1] The universal, classroom-based *Second Step* program for Kindergarten through Grade 5 promotes students' social-emotional skill development. A 2011 meta-analysis found that students participating in such programs showed significant gains in social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as academic achievement.[2] It also found that school staff were quite successful in delivering SEL programs. This is all great news. It means students participating in a school-based SEL program have a better chance of experiencing academic and life success.[3]

Students participating in a social-emotional learning program have a better chance of experiencing success.

Making Our Program Work Better

To promote school success, it's our ongoing goal to make the research-based K–5 *Second Step* program work even better. When we look at the research, self-regulation skills surface as important for increasing students' chances for social and academic success.[4] Improved student self-regulation has emerged as one of the main factors behind SEL programs' positive influence on academic achievement. And unlike other factors that can influence student success, such as socioeconomic status or IQ, self-regulation can be taught.[5]

What Is Self-Regulation?
The ability to monitor and manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors

Self-Regulation and School Success

What is self-regulation, and how does it contribute to student success in school? In a nutshell, self-regulation is the ability to monitor and manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.[6, 7] It's what helps students focus their attention on a lesson when they may be distracted by noisy classmates, a problem they had at recess, or excitement about an upcoming birthday party. The ability to self-regulate helps students get along better with teachers and other students.[8] Students with good self-regulation skills get the most out of school,[3] both in terms of academics and peer interactions. This can set them up for life success.

Unfortunately, students who experience difficulties with self-regulation can also experience higher rates of school expulsion, especially in the early school years.[9–11] They're also at greater risk for low academic achievement, emotional and behavioral problems, peer rejection, and school dropout.[5,12,13] There's good evidence that learning to self-regulate can help reduce the likelihood of students experiencing these negative outcomes.

The *Second Step* program helps children build self-regulation skills

Brain Builder Games	Skills for Learning
⬇	⬇
Executive Function	Academic Achievement
Emotion Management	Problem Solving
⬇	⬇
Controlled Self-Expression	Overcoming Challenges

Teaching Self-Regulation Skills

Research is beginning to show that self-regulation skills can be taught[14]—and the K–5 *Second Step* program is designed to do this in a number of ways:

1. **Brain Builders**
    From Kindergarten through Grade 3, students develop skills foundational to self-regulation in the *Second Step* program via short, five-minute games called Brain Builders. These are specifically designed to build the areas of students' brains that help them control and shift their attention, use their memory, and manage their behavior—skills known together as executive-function skills. Research links these skills to later academic achievement among children from economically disadvantaged households[15, 16] and also indicates that games like Brain Builders can be used successfully to improve students' self-regulation skills.[16–18] The areas of the brain that carry out these skills are still developing in this age group. So it's an ideal time to challenge students' executive-function skills directly with the Brain Builder games.

2. **Skills for Learning**

The K–5 *Second Step* program further promotes development of self-regulation skills with its focus on skills for learning. Students learn four self-regulation skills they need to be successful learners: focusing attention, listening, using self-talk, and being assertive when asking for help with academic tasks. These skills have the potential to support school readiness and academic achievement.[2, 19] The benefits of the four self-regulatory skills taught in the program go beyond academics; the skills are also designed to support the rest of the program content by providing a critical foundation for development of social-emotional competence.[1]

3. **Emotion Management**

The K–5 *Second Step* program's emotion-management content also helps strengthen students' self-regulation skills. Emotion management is a central component of self-regulation.[20] A student who can manage emotions well has the self-regulation to cope with strong feelings and express them in socially acceptable ways.[21] For example, emotion-management skills can help an excited student manage the urge to blurt out the answer to a teacher's question. Or on the playground, emotion-management skills can help a student control the impulse to hit another child who has taken away a ball.

4. **Problem Solving**

Problem-solving skills, another program focus, can also contribute to self-regulation, and vice versa. The lessons in the Problem-Solving Unit reinforce use of emotion-management skills; children are taught that when they have a problem with peers, it's useful to calm down first and then apply a set of problem-solving steps. Additionally, in the course of practicing the final problem-solving step, students get practice making realistic plans and checking them against criteria for effective plans. Planning is a useful skill that can help students develop self-regulation and that they can use to handle both regular classroom challenges and problem situations.[17]

Self-regulation skills help students:

- Focus on lessons
- Participate in classroom activities
- Make friends
- Get along with peers
- Follow directions
- Make good choices

Success in Life

Students with good self-regulation skills get the most out of school. They can focus more easily on lessons and are better prepared to participate in classroom activities. They're able to make friends and get along with their peers. They can follow directions and make good choices. This skill set steers students not only toward school success, but also success in life. And that's what we want for all students.

Second Step: Skills for Social and Academic Success

Our universal, classroom-based *Second Step* program is designed to teach children how to understand and manage their emotions, control their reactions, be aware of others' feelings, problem-solve, and make responsible decisions. It includes short, easy-to-teach weekly lessons, engaging songs and games, and daily activities and take-home materials to reinforce learning in Kindergarten through Grade 5.

The research-based program helps make it easy for teachers to integrate social-emotional learning into their classrooms, which decreases problem behaviors and increases whole-school success by promoting self-regulation, safety, and support. The program aligns with many other school initiatives and standards, including Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RTI), the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) Mindsets and Behaviors, Common Core academic standards, and Restorative Practices.

Kindergarten—Grade 5
Second Step program

To learn more about the *Second Step* program for elementary schools, please visit:

Second Step program
cfchildren.org/second-step

Also available:

Second Step Bullying Prevention Unit: The Power to Create a Positive School Climate cfchildren.org/bullying-prevention

To discuss how your students may benefit from the *Second Step* program, contact :

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