

Intentional Self-Regulation in Youth: Applying Research Findings to Practice and Programs

KEYWORDS

self-regulation, intentional self-regulation, positive youth development, youth policy, youth mentoring

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

The existing body of research on self-regulation skills links them strongly to positive youth development. The authors of this book chapter define self-regulation as “people’s deliberate attempts to use, modify, or inhibit their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviours to reach their goals” (p. 21). The chapter provides an overview of key findings from self-regulation research, emphasizes intentional self-regulation as critical during adolescence, outlines limitations of the existing research on self-regulation, and recommends five priorities for improving youth policy and practice. The authors aim to make research findings accessible to youth development practitioners and policy makers interested in using self-regulation research to promote thriving among youth.

METHODOLOGY

The authors conducted a literature review of recent self-regulation research, encompassing studies dating back to the early 2000s. They included childhood self-regulation, but focused mainly on Intentional Self-Regulation (ISR) during adolescence. ISR consists of “actions that are actively aimed toward harmonizing demands in the person’s social and physical context with a person’s resources in order to attain better functioning and enhance self-development” (p. 23). The authors also review the findings of two landmark studies: 4-H and Project GPS.

KEY FINDINGS

Lessons Learned from Self-Regulation Research:

- Self-regulation helps young people stay on positive developmental trajectories from adolescence to adulthood, and adjust to change and life transitions, such as moving from high school to post-secondary education.
- Self-regulation has been strongly linked to the Five Cs of positive youth development (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring).
- Self-regulation can help foster feelings of engagement by helping people take advantage of opportunities in their contexts in order to support and promote their own development.

- Higher self-regulation is connected to higher social and emotional competence and academic achievement.
- Similarly, though to a lesser extent, self-regulation is related to lower levels of problematic development, (e.g. substance use and mental health issues).
- Definitions of self-regulation vary widely as there are many different measures used to assess it.
- Advanced cognitive self-regulation, which develops during adolescence and young adulthood, has been termed Intentional Self-Regulation (ISR). ISR refers to the ability to set goals, plan how to achieve them, and adapt to challenges along the way.
- During childhood, girls score higher on measures of self-regulation than boys. However, there is no consensus on significant gender differences during adolescence.
- Results from Project GPS, which measured the quality of mentoring relationships, indicate that the mentor-mentee relationship influences ISR skills in youth.
- Some of the limitations of the research on adolescent ISR are: a) The numerous definitions of self-regulation; b) Limited understanding of how different aspects of self-regulation influence functioning in different domains, or if self-regulation skills are transferrable between domains; c) The complexity of ISR measurement.

Priorities for Youth Policy and Practice:

1. Use self-regulation measures to evaluate youth programs: Current ideologies about youth success prioritize scores on academic achievement tests. Self-regulation should be considered in defining success and may be particularly important for marginalized youth.
2. Ensure increased funding for self-regulation programs: Research on youth and adult self-regulation is incomplete, with many unanswered questions.
3. Promote ISR across the lifespan: ISR skills can be improved in any phase of life, especially during adolescence.
4. Ensure a multifaceted approach: Policies and programs to increase youth ISR need to provide multiple resources and exemplars for youth, and aim to impact all people with whom they interact. This has the added benefit of improving adults' lives in the community, which, in turn, benefits youth as well.
5. Combine self-regulation interventions with other positive youth development interventions: Because youth ISR is less strongly associated with negative outcomes, the authors recommend combining self-regulation approaches with other strategies to address problem behaviours.

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This book chapter presents a review of recent youth self-regulation research with a focus on Intentional Self-Regulation (ISR) in adolescence. It covers central findings and limitations of the research, and recommends five priorities for improving youth policy and practice.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Even though there is ample research evidence of the link between self-regulation skills and positive youth development, these findings have often not been reported in an accessible way to practitioners and policy makers. This report is a valuable resource in bridging the gap between research and practice, and therefore indirectly helps to increase positive outcomes for youth by asserting the importance of ISR.

“Because of the important link between self-regulation strategies and positive outcomes, it is critical that programs and policies designed to promote youth development encourage the growth of young people’s self-regulation skills.”

Weiner, Geldhof,
& Gestsdottir, 2015

RECAP

Self-regulation relates to people’s ability to control their responses in order to achieve their goals, and is strongly associated with positive youth development. ISR should be prioritized in program and policy evaluation and funding for all age groups. ISR interventions should be implemented as part of multifaceted program approaches.

APA CITATION

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