

POLICY BRIEF (ISSUE 9)

Help Children Build Self-Regulation and Learning Effectively Through Everyday Routines

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Background

Self-regulation—the ability to control impulses, pay attention, and delay gratification—is essential for learning and everyday functioning in early childhood. Executive function is a key component of self-regulation that helps children remember instructions, follow rules, stay focused, and persist when tasks are difficult. These abilities develop rapidly in the early years and remain important throughout schooling.

Executive function does not develop in isolation. Rather, it is shaped by the everyday environments and routines children experience at home, at school, and in their communities. Family resources, parenting practices, and children's daily activities all provide important opportunities to support children's development in executive function.

What This Study Examined

A new study using two waves of nationally representative Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study (SG-LEADS) data followed 2,542 children from early to middle childhood—ages 3–6 at the first wave and 5–8 at the second. The sample included children from diverse cultural backgrounds, including ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Indian children.

This study examined four interconnected parts of children's everyday lives:

- **Family resources and circumstances:** parents' education, economic stress, and self-control, measured through parent self-report; and verbal cognitive skills, measured through a standardized passage-comprehension task.
- **Parenting practices:** warmth, rule-setting, and punishment, measured through parent self-report.

- **Children's daily routines:** time spent watching television, using electronic devices, taking part in achievement-oriented activities, engaging in physical play, sleeping and doing household chores. Primary caregivers reported children's time use through two-day diaries covering one weekday and one weekend day.
- **Children's executive function:** working memory (holding information in mind) and delay of gratification (choosing a larger later reward over a smaller immediate one), assessed through direct tasks with children at both waves.

What the Evidence Shows

Family resources matter. Parents with higher verbal cognitive skills were more likely to report consistent rule-setting. Greater parental self-control was associated with greater warmth, less punitive parenting, more time spent by children in achievement-oriented activities, and less television viewing. Economic stress was associated with less parental warmth and greater electronic-device use. These findings highlight that parenting and children's daily routines are shaped partly by the resources and circumstances in which families raise their children.

Consistent rule-setting was a key organising mechanism. Parents who reported more consistent rule-setting tended to have children who spent less time on screens, more time in achievement-oriented activities, and more time sleeping. Rule-setting was also an important link between parents' resources and children's daily routines.

Screen time was associated with weaker executive function. Children who spent more time watching television or using electronic devices tended to show weaker working memory and delay of gratification. This suggests that children's everyday screen exposure may be an important target for efforts to support self-regulation.

Achievement-oriented activities were associated with stronger executive function. Children who spent more time in achievement-oriented activities, including academic and extracurricular activities, tended to show stronger working memory and delay of gratification. These activities may provide opportunities for children to practise sustained attention, goal-directed behaviour, and persistence—skills that support self-regulation.

Physical activity was associated with stronger executive function. Children who spent more time in physically active play tended to show stronger working memory and delay of gratification over time. Opportunities to move, play, and explore may provide a valuable context for children to practise self-regulation.

One approach will not fit every family. Broad pathways were similar across Chinese, Malay and Indian families, but their strength and configuration varied, indicating the need for culturally responsive implementation.

What This Means: Policy and Practice Recommendations

For Parents & Families

- **Seek available support when facing resource constraints.** When possible, connect with family support services, financial and social assistance programmes, childcare support, and parent coaching that can help reduce stress and support healthy routines. Creating balanced routines is easier when families have access to these resources and services.
- **Create consistent, predictable routines.** Set clear, age-appropriate expectations around bedtime, screen use, meals, and other daily activities.
- **Provide alternatives to screen time.** Offer active play, creative activities, learning opportunities, and family time when reducing television or electronic-device use.
- **Balance learning with sleep and physical activity.** Children's routines should include opportunities for enrichment alongside sufficient sleep and time to move and play.

For Schools & Community Programs

- **Provide families with practical support.** Parenting and family programmes can provide concrete strategies for setting rules, managing screen use, and creating balanced routines.
- **Build self-regulation into everyday school routines.** Schools can reinforce self-regulation through predictable routines, clear expectations, enrichment, and regular physical activity and play.
- **Expand affordable enrichment and recreation opportunities.** After-school and community programmes can provide accessible alternatives to screen-based activities, particularly for families with fewer resources.

For Policymakers

- **Reduce the resource constraints that disrupt family routines.** Embed EF promotion within broader support for families experiencing financial strain, irregular work schedules, or caregiving pressure. Connect financial and social assistance with accessible childcare, parent coaching, and free community activities.
- **Invest in accessible alternatives to screen-based activities.** Safe public spaces, active-play opportunities, enrichment programmes, and community activities can give children meaningful alternatives to screen-based activities.

- **Support parents, not just children's behaviour.** Family services and parenting programmes should address the circumstances that shape parenting and children's routines.
- **Embed self-regulation in child-development policy.** Supporting children's development should include not only academic learning, but also the everyday routines, relationships, and activities that provide opportunities to practise self-regulation.

Key Takeaway

Children's executive function was stronger when families had greater resources to support consistent parenting and when children's daily routines included less screen time and more learning and physical activity. Supporting self-regulation therefore requires more than asking families to change children's behaviour. Policy should strengthen family resources and parenting support, while ensuring that children have accessible opportunities to learn, play, and be active.

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Sources

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