

# Early self-regulation boosts children's educational success

October 13 2022

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Self-regulation, i.e., the ability to manage attention, emotions and impulses, as well as to pursue individual goals with perseverance, is not a skill that we usually associate with young children. However, the school

closures due to the pandemic and the increased usage of digital media by children have now shown how important these abilities are, especially for children.

Studies show that people who demonstrated self-regulation as children go on to have on average higher income, better health and greater life satisfaction. They also show that the ability to exert self-regulation can already be trained in a targeted manner in childhood.

How can the training of self-regulation skills be integrated into the standard elementary school day without taking up too much teaching time? Is it possible to teach young pupils an abstract self-regulation strategy in an appropriate way? Does teaching such skills have the potential to improve long-term educational success?

## **Self-regulation improves even with short training units**

An international team from the Department of Economics at the University of Zurich (Switzerland) and from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany) examined these questions. Using a [randomized controlled study](#) in [elementary schools](#) involving more than 500 first graders, the research team was able to show that even a short training unit led to a significant and sustainable improvement in self-regulation.

The training did not just affect self-regulation abilities; the children had significantly improved reading ability and an improved focus on careless mistakes one year after the training, and were also considerably more likely to be admitted to a selective academic secondary school (Gymnasium) three years after the training.

"Our study has shown how the training of this skill can be explicitly embedded in [primary school](#) teaching at an early stage. An increase in [self-regulation](#) enables children to take on more responsibility for their own learning and to set goals on their own and work toward them," says Ernst Fehr, professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Zurich.

According to the last author, children's comprehensive key skills that are of fundamental importance for good educational attainment and a successful later life can be improved thanks to the simple scalability of the program.

## **Easily integrated into the regular timetable**

Due to concerns from previous practical experience, the study authors designed the training units in an extremely cost-effective and time-saving manner, in such a way that they could be introduced in any primary school setting: the training unit lasted only five hours, and teachers participated in a three-hour training session and received completely developed teaching materials which they could integrate directly into the regular class schedule.

The training units were based on the MCII Strategy ("Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions"), which has already been the subject of excellent research studies in adults and older students. The teachers presented the abstract strategy in a playful manner using a picture book and the role model of a hurdle jumper.

In a first step, the children imagined the positive effects of reaching a goal. They contrasted them with the obstacles that might face them on the way ("Mental Contrasting"). The children then identified specific behaviors to face the obstacles and develop "when-then" plans ("Implementation Intention").

## Positive effect on society

"The special feature of our study is the long-term ripple effects that this short training unit can have. These effects benefit the child, and they are transferred in many ways to society as a whole over the course of the child's life," says first author Daniel Schunk, professor of public and behavioral economics at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. "The fact that early investments in such fundamental skills not only benefit the child alone, but also society, should be given more attention in education policy."

The research was published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

**More information:** Daniel Schunk, Teaching self-regulation, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-022-01449-w](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01449-w)

Provided by University of Zurich

Citation: Early self-regulation boosts children's educational success (2022, October 13) retrieved 7 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2022-10-early-self-regulation-boosts-children-success.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.