

spark*/spark*EL Backgrounder on

Supporting growing self-regulation

When we commit to helping children become more self-regulated, we also have to commit to supporting that increasing autonomy. Adults who interact with children typically use one of two main styles: autonomy-supportive or dependence-supportive.

A **dependence-supportive style** has a goal of inducing the child to think, feel or behave in specific ways. In this relationship, the adult is either 'doing to' the child by making him do things, or 'doing for' the child by taking over an activity or task. The 'doing to' style can be direct or indirect. A **direct** approach attempts to motivate the child by creating external pressures to act. The external pressures can be things like imposing deadlines, ordering the child to do something or using incentives and prizes for acting in certain ways. **Indirect** approaches try to motivate the child through feelings of guilt, shame and anxiety. This may be done by withdrawing attention or

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approval, by linking a way of thinking, feeling or behaving to the child's self-esteem (e.g. "good boys don't do that."), promoting perfectionism, or by offering conditional regard where affection and appreciation are contingent on the child's behaviors. Adults use a dependence-supportive style for a number of reasons: (1) they may believe children are motivated primarily by external rewards and don't realize there are other options; (2) the child is viewed as disruptive or difficult to deal with (e.g. the child is passive, acting out or unengaged); (3) there are time pressures to get a task completed and/or done correctly; and (4) the adult may view their role as one of control and authority where letting the child try things out on his own feels too chaotic.

An **autonomy-supportive style** focuses on identifying, nurturing and developing the child's inner



spark*, *Self-regulation Program of Awareness and Resilience in Kids.*, is an innovative evidence-based program that teaches children how to manage and regulate their behavior, thinking and emotions. **spark*EL** is spark* for Elementary-school-aged children. Now we have a parent version—**Self-Regulation in Everyday Life**.

These programs are based on well-researched theory, current neurology, extensive clinical practice and **spark***-specific research.

spark*, **spark*EL** and **Self-Regulation in Everyday Life** are comprehensive, practical and systematic and provide all information and resources needed to implement the program successfully.

Find out more at <http://spark-kids.ca> and www.self-reg-everyday.com

resources, doing with the child rather than doing to or doing for. In this style, the adult (a) takes the child's perspective, (b) welcomes the child's thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and (c) supports the child's development of self-regulation. By taking and integrating the child's perspective into activities, the adult can more readily understand and engage

the child. By welcoming the child's ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, the adult can create situations that align with the child's understanding and encourage extension into new areas of learning. Adult-child interactions revolve around supporting the child's growing self-regulation and autonomy.

Why use an autonomy-supportive style?

We've become aware over the past decades that external rewards can turn off or undermine children's motivation. Such approaches constrain the development of self-regulation in children because the children don't get a chance to sort through behavior, thinking and emotions. Research has shown that, when an autonomy-supportive approach is used, children become more intrinsically motivated (that is, motivated by the challenge or interest in a task). Children also become more curious, creative,

motivated by mastery, more persistent, and feel more competent and engaged. In contrast, use of a dependence-supportive style has been found to lead to deficits in self-regulation.

There are benefits not only to the child when adults use an autonomy-supportive style. Adults who use an autonomy-supportive approach report an increased sense of personal accomplishment and less emotional exhaustion. They also experience higher levels of satisfaction and well-being.

How to change our style to promote self-regulation

When helping children develop self-regulation, we need to move away from 'doing to' and 'doing for' the child and toward 'doing with'. That is a progression from a dependence-supportive style

toward an autonomy-supportive style. This can then lead to greater likelihood of the child's doing it on his or her own (do it yourself – DIY).



Steps to changing your style

1. Become aware of the language and attitudes you use when interacting with children.
2. Nurture the child's intrinsic motivation, encouraging autonomy, competence and relatedness.
3. Reduce your use of direct orders and commands (e.g. "get started", "do it this way.", "stop that") and pressure-inducing words (e.g. "hurry up").
4. Take more time to listen. Welcome and respond to the child's questions and comments and acknowledge the children's perspectives and experiences (e.g. "you have a good point", "that was a difficult one").
5. Give explanations and rationales for activities. That'll help justify their time and effort.
6. Praise signs of improvement and mastery, explaining what the child did well. Encourage effort and give hints that might help the child make progress (e.g. "look here and see if there might be some clues that could help you").

See the Language of spark* Backgrounder for more information.