



# ResearchLink



## Effortful Control: Implications for Children's Development

Katie Paschall & Jennifer Mortensen

*Waiting in a stiff chair at the doctor's office, needing to raise your hand before you are called on, making a multi-step plan of your Saturday chores before starting, following instructions despite distractions – this is the impact of effortful control in your daily life.*

### What is effortful control?

- Effortful control is the ability to control behavior, thoughts and emotions in order to interact with people and environments with purpose (Rothbart & Bates, 2006).
- Effortful control is a critical component of self-regulation, and helps facilitate success in school settings, positive peer relationships, and social skill development (Liew, 2012).
- Effortful control is a component of social-emotional development, yet the development of effortful control is critically tied to children's cognitive, language and even fine motor development (Lengua, 2012).

### How does effortful control develop?

The developmental period of early childhood (infancy to age 8) is a key time for children to learn effortful control. Positive relationships with parents, teachers, peers and others play a central role in this development. In early childhood, young children need to learn how to regulate their

own attention and behavior in order to govern a wide variety of experiences, both internal (e.g., sleeping, hunger, temperature) and external (e.g., bedtime routines, playing with peers). Experiences with adults, teachers and peers provide opportunities for children to “practice” different degrees of effortful control.

# Effortful Control: Implications for Children's Development

## Effortful Control and Academic Success

Research demonstrates that children with lower levels of effortful control exhibit more aggressive behaviors and lower social competence. Conversely, children with high levels of effortful control are able to control their emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger, fear) and are better able to adhere to social standards. Children are able to attend to their schoolwork only after regulating the social, emotional and environmental stimulations that may distract them (Liew, 2012).

When children can maintain attention, control their impulses and act purposefully, they are better able to

participate in the classroom, are more likely to meet language and cognitive developmental milestones on time, and show increased performance in math and emergent literacy skills. Effortful control has consequences for children's social interactions in the classroom as well. Children with better effortful control are more likely to have positive relationships with both teachers and peers. The consequences of not developing effortful control in early childhood have long-term implications for later development, academic success, and positive social learning experiences (Spinrad, 2007).



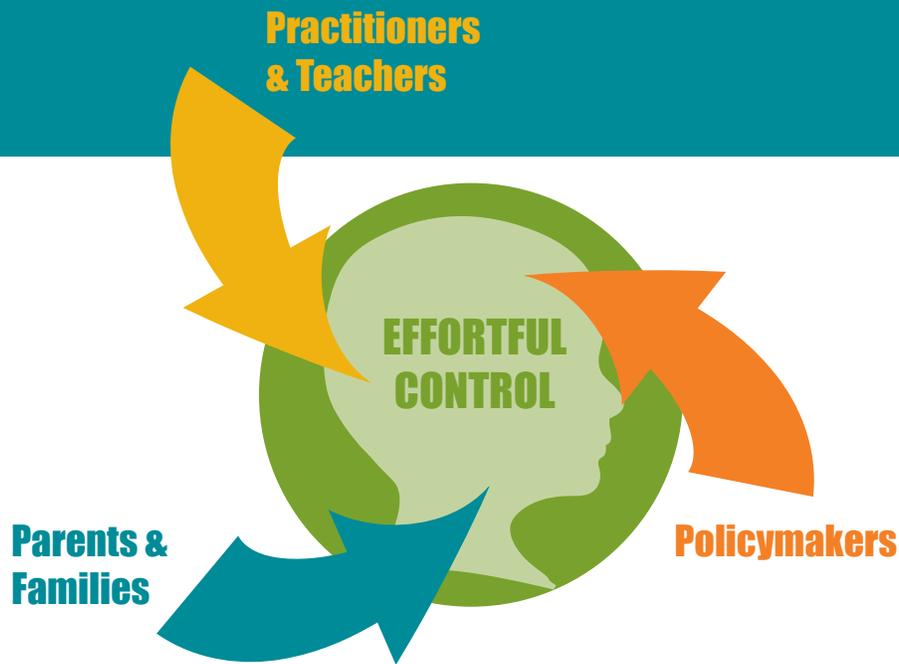
## Promoting Effortful Control

Practitioners, teachers, parents, families and even policymakers can promote the development of effortful control in a variety of ways.

### *Parents & Families*

Parents play a critical role in fostering the earlier stages of effortful control. Empirical evidence shows that maternal sensitivity to children's cues in infancy and toddlerhood are strongly related to children's effortful control in first grade. Consistent, sensitive and warm caregiving is related to children's effortful control as it provides a stable relationship in which children can practice regulation skills and gain assistance from parents. Additionally, parents can provide predictability through structure and routines. Predictability is a way for children to plan ahead and learn how to follow multi-step directions (Mintze, Hamre & Hatfield, 2011).

Parents should also assess their own self-regulatory strategies: Do you get angry easily? When you are upset, do you want to talk to people, or do you seek out a different strategy? Are you easily distracted? What strategies work best for you as a parent? When parents get in touch with their own feelings, they can use scaffolding behaviors to help their children. Scaffolding behaviors for effortful control involve validating and labeling children's feelings, and aiding children in finding a solution to their moments of emotional dysregulation. Finally, parents can allow children to problem-solve and work through challenging situations.



### *Practitioners & Teachers*

Teachers, doctors, childcare workers and other family workers are poised to disseminate knowledge about the components of effortful control to parents and other professionals. These practitioners need to consider developmental milestones, and developmentally appropriate practice, in order to accommodate children’s development when working with families. Families need to be involved in their children’s development of effortful control, and this can include interventions, which highlight parental self-regulation.

Teachers and childcare workers are regular caregiving figures in children’s lives, thus they play a particularly critical role in the development of effortful control. Children with poor effortful control struggle with the self-regulation needed for effective learning experiences.

### *Policymakers*

Because effortful control is a component of social-emotional development, funding and resources should focus on programs that work to promote social skills and emotional competence. These programs should incorporate parents as the teachers of such skills, because early childhood development occurs within the context of close adult-child relationships.

In developing standards for early childhood education, policymakers must consider children’s developmental

Research demonstrates that a sensitive, positive relationship with a teacher can improve academic outcomes for children with poor effortful control. Information about effortful control should be a regular component of teacher training. Teachers should strive to maintain positive, sensitive relationships with children facing regulatory difficulties, and provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to practice their effortful control skills.

Librarians, child care workers and others who work with children can work to provide “quiet” spaces for children, as well as places for “free play.” Simple, common games also help children practice effortful control: Simon Says, Duck Duck Goose, I Spy, Red-Light Green-Light, Peek-A-Boo and other turn-taking games.

abilities as well as evidence-based programs that have been deemed effective at bolstering children’s social-emotional development. Effective early childhood standards must go beyond traditional academic requirements and include requirements that teachers be trained in promoting effortful control and social-emotional competence. This can help ensure academic success and fewer behavior problems when children reach elementary school.



## About the Authors

### **Katie Paschall**

Katie is a doctoral student in Family Studies and Human Development, with a B.S. from Arizona State University and M.S. from the University of Arizona in the same discipline. Broadly, she is interested in early development and family processes in the context of socioeconomic disadvantage as well as prevention, intervention, program planning and evaluation and quantitative methodology. Her dissertation research is supported by the Doris Duke Fellowship for the Promotion of Child Well-Being. Currently, she is working with Dr. Ann Mastergeorge, evaluating two prevention programs focused on promoting sensitive parenting in families with toddlers, and in families with preschoolers in Arizona. Katie has experience working in Early Head Start, Crisis Nursery of Phoenix, Southwest Human Development and the United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona. Additionally, she has worked with partners in Cooperative Extension to evaluate early childhood program and promote early childhood awareness throughout Southern Arizona.

### **Jennifer Mortensen**

Jennifer is a Family Studies and Human Development doctoral student at the University of Arizona with a B.S. in Early Childhood Education and M.S. in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Nevada, Reno. Her primary area of focus is socio-emotional development of infants and toddlers from high-risk families, especially for young children in center-based child care programs, such as Early Head Start. Her dissertation research is supported by the Doris Duke Fellowship for the Promotion of Child Well-Being, and examines the role sensitive caregiving in child care plays in the development of young children's emotion regulation, especially for children

who face the most risk at home.

Recently, Jennifer has worked with her primary advisor, Dr. Melissa Barnett, in examining neighborhood, family, and parenting processes in Mexican-origin families, and collaborated with Dr. Ann Mastergeorge in conducting a meta-analytic review of parenting intervention programs for high-risk families with infants and toddlers. Jennifer has experience working as a K-2 teacher, but her main source of motivation for her research comes from her time working as an infant/toddler teacher at Early Head Start.

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