

INTERNAL LANGUAGE

What is this developmental skill?

Internal language, sometimes called inner speech or self-talk, is the silent conversation people have with themselves. It helps children think through problems, remember directions, regulate emotions, plan ahead, and control their behavior. Over time, the supportive language children hear from caregivers becomes the language they use to guide themselves.

How does this normally develop?

Young children often talk out loud while playing or solving problems.

Gradually, this external speech becomes internal. Children begin silently reminding themselves: "Slow down." "First this, then that." "I can try again." "It's okay." Supportive caregiving provides the model for this internal dialogue.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Children who experience neglect often hear fewer supportive verbal interactions. If caregivers rarely explain, encourage, coach, or comfort, children have fewer examples of healthy self-talk to internalize. Chronic stress may also interfere with the development of executive functioning that relies on internal language. Instead of an encouraging inner voice, children may have little internal guidance—or an inner voice shaped by criticism, fear, or unpredictability.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Act before thinking.
- Forget multi-step directions.
- Have difficulty planning.
- Become overwhelmed by simple tasks.
- Give up quickly when frustrated.
- Struggle with emotional regulation.
- Need frequent adult reminders for tasks they previously completed.

These challenges often reflect delayed internal language rather than a lack of motivation.

Parenting Implications

Adults can strengthen internal language by thinking out loud during everyday activities.

Helpful strategies include:

- Modeling problem solving aloud.
- Narrating coping strategies.
- Breaking tasks into steps.
- Using encouraging language.
- Helping children label emotions.
- Gradually encouraging children to verbalize their own plans before acting.

Over time, children begin using these same words internally to guide themselves.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking: *"He should know what to do by now."* Try thinking: *"He may not yet have developed the internal voice that guides planning and self-control. My calm coaching today becomes his inner voice tomorrow."*

