

SELF-MONITORING

What is this developmental skill?

Self-monitoring is the ability to observe and evaluate one's own thoughts, emotions, and behavior while making adjustments when needed. It helps children recognize mistakes, notice how their behavior affects others, evaluate their progress toward a goal, and change course when something is not working. Self-monitoring allows children to ask themselves, *"How am I doing?"* and *"Do I need to do something differently?"*

How does this normally develop?

Self-monitoring develops gradually through relationships with responsive adults. Before children can evaluate themselves, caregivers first help them notice what they are doing by providing gentle feedback, asking reflective questions, and modeling self-reflection. During the elementary years, children become increasingly able to recognize their own mistakes and adjust their behavior with support. As the brain continues to mature through adolescence, self-monitoring becomes more accurate and independent.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere with self-monitoring because children may receive little consistent feedback about their behavior or emotional experiences. Without adults helping them reflect on what happened and why, children have fewer opportunities to develop awareness of their own thoughts and actions. Chronic stress may also reduce the mental resources available for self-reflection, causing children to react automatically rather than evaluate their behavior. As a result, they may repeat mistakes without recognizing patterns or understanding how their behavior affects others.

What might this look like?

A child with difficulties in self-monitoring may:

- Repeat the same mistakes despite correction.
- Have difficulty recognizing when they have hurt someone's feelings.
- Believe they completed a task correctly when important parts are missing.
- Struggle to recognize when they are becoming frustrated or overwhelmed.
- Be surprised when others react negatively to their behavior.
- Need frequent reminders to check their work.
- Have difficulty learning from previous experiences.
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Parenting Implications

Children develop self-monitoring through supportive reflection rather than criticism. Instead of immediately pointing out mistakes, ask questions that encourage children to think about their own behavior. For example, *"How do you think that worked?"* or *"Is there anything you would do differently next time?"* Normalize mistakes as opportunities for learning and provide specific, constructive feedback. Modeling your own self-reflection—such as saying, *"I forgot something. Next time I'll make a list."*—also teaches children that evaluating and adjusting behavior is a normal part of learning.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, *"They should know better by now,"* consider, *"They may not yet recognize what they're doing or how it's affecting others."* This shift helps caregivers move away from blame and toward teaching awareness. By creating opportunities for gentle reflection and helping children connect their actions with outcomes, adults strengthen self-monitoring and foster greater independence, responsibility, and emotional maturity.

