

Factors Affecting Self-Control in Children (4–12 Years): A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Self-control is a crucial developmental skill underlying children's behavioral regulation and social adjustment. However, research on self-control remains fragmented, with limited synthesis of how internal and external factors interact to shape its development. This study aims to systematically examine factors influencing self-control in children aged 4–12 years. A systematic literature review was conducted using Google Scholar with predefined keywords related to self-control and child development. Studies were included if they were empirical, examined factors influencing self-control, involved children aged 4–12 years, were published in English or Indonesian, and were published between 2020 and 2025. Following screening, 13 articles met the eligibility criteria. Methodological quality was assessed using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist, with most studies demonstrating moderate to high quality, while PRISMA guidelines were used as a reporting standard rather than a methodological framework. Findings indicate that self-control develops progressively through interactions between internal and external factors. Emotion regulation was one of the most consistently associated internal factors, supporting children's ability to manage impulses and adapt behavior to social demands. Other internal factors included executive function, temperament, and cognitive maturity, although findings varied across studies. External factors included consistent and responsive parenting, as well as structured school and social environments. Overall, self-control develops through a continuous and contextual learning process involving individual capabilities and environmental influences. This review is limited by the use of a single database, the small number of studies, and methodological heterogeneity, highlighting the importance of integrated support from families and educational environments.

KEYWORDS

Childhood; self-control; self-regulation; self-control factors.

Introduction

Self-control is a fundamental capacity in child development that underlies children's ability to regulate behavior, emotions, and social interactions. It plays a central role in enabling children to adapt to environmental demands, follow rules, and engage in socially appropriate behavior. Conceptually, self-control refers to an individual's capacity to consciously regulate thoughts, emotions, and actions to achieve adaptive outcomes in both the short and long term (Putra & Hartono, 2024). This ability encompasses not only resisting impulsive urges but also evaluating consequences, making reasoned decisions, and aligning behavior with social norms. A growing body of research shows that children with well-developed self-control tend to demonstrate more positive developmental outcomes, including better academic performance, stronger social relationships, and more effective emotional regulation. These children are generally more capable of managing attention, delaying gratification, and navigating social situations constructively. In contrast, low self-control is associated with various maladaptive outcomes, such as impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and difficulties in adhering to rules and expectations (Ma et al., 2025).

Despite the increasing attention to self-control in developmental research, existing studies tend to examine its determinants in isolation, often focusing separately on individual (e.g., cognitive and emotional processes) or environmental factors (e.g.,

parenting and school context). This fragmented approach limits a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact dynamically in shaping children's self-control. Therefore, a systematic synthesis of the literature is needed to integrate current evidence and identify the key internal and external determinants that contribute to the development of self-control in children.

Furthermore, self-control plays a crucial role in helping individuals navigate the dynamic situations of everyday life. This ability enables individuals to remain adaptive even under stressful conditions or changing environments. However, self-control over internal impulses often presents a complex challenge. This is evident in the large number of individuals who experience difficulty controlling their behavior in different situations or when facing diverse social demands, resulting in inconsistent responses (Nugroho, 2024).

The difficulty in maintaining self-control across these situations demonstrates that this ability is not static but is influenced by various factors, both internal and external. Internal factors include emotional state, cognitive maturity, and individual experience, while external factors include environmental pressure, social norms, and support from those around them. Therefore, developing self-control needs to be understood as a continuous and contextual process, requiring practice, habituation, and a supportive environment so that individuals can consistently optimize their self-regulation skills across various situations (Mischel et al., 1989). Therefore, it can be concluded that self-control not only serves as a behavioral control mechanism but also serves as a crucial foundation for shaping an individual's overall quality of life. This ability is key to reducing verbally aggressive behavior and enhancing an individual's ability to function adaptively in various life contexts.

The presence of others in an individual's life significantly facilitates various activities and decision-making processes. In the context of individual development, particularly during childhood and adolescence, peers play a crucial role as sources of social and emotional support, and even as behavioral models (Zimmerman, Barry J.; Schunk, 2011). Peers not only provide a platform for sharing experiences but also serve as socialization agents, contributing to the formation of an individual's values, attitudes, and thought patterns. This aligns with (Bandura, 1997) perspective on social learning theory, which emphasizes that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and interaction with their social environment, including peers. Interactions with peers in the school environment play a crucial role in the development and formation of a child's identity. Through these interactions, children learn to understand social norms, develop communication skills, and build self-concept. Peers can also influence an individual's behavior, including motivation to learn, participation in academic activities, and how they interpret learning experiences. In many cases, shared perceptions within a peer group can reinforce certain attitudes and behaviors, both positive and negative (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

On the other hand, self-control is a crucial psychological aspect in supporting an individual's ability to adapt to their social environment. Self-control can be defined as an individual's ability to regulate, control, and direct behavior, emotions, and internal drives to align with expected norms and goals. Individuals with good levels of self-control tend to be able to restrain negative impulses, consider the consequences of each action, and make more adaptive decisions (Eisenberg et al., 2010). Conversely, individuals with low self-control tend to be more easily influenced by environmental pressures, including negative peer influence, potentially exhibiting deviant behavior. In the context of social interactions, self-control functions as a control mechanism that helps individuals manage their responses to external

stimuli, such as conflict, peer pressure, and temptations to engage in behavior that deviates from norms. With good self-control, individuals are able to maintain behavior consistent with prevailing social values and build healthy and harmonious interpersonal relationships within the community (Alzena & Oktari, 2026).

Furthermore, in education, self-control plays a crucial role in supporting students' academic success and social development. Students with good self-control tend to be more disciplined in their studies, able to manage their time effectively, and able to avoid negative behaviors such as procrastination, breaking rules, or engaging in conflict (Pujawati, 2015). Furthermore, self-control also supports students' ability to interact positively with teachers and peers, thus creating a conducive learning environment. Thus, it can be concluded that peer interaction and self-control are two interrelated factors in shaping individual behavior and development. The presence of peers can have a strong influence on behavior, while self-control acts as a filter that determines whether this influence will be internalized positively or negatively. Therefore, developing self-control is a crucial aspect that needs to be considered in efforts to support adaptive individual development, both in social and educational contexts (Thahir, 2018).

Self-control is an individual's ability to regulate behavior, emotions, and impulses to align with long-term goals and social demands. During childhood, self-control forms an important foundation for social, emotional, and academic development. Children with strong self-control tend to demonstrate greater adaptability, better academic achievement, and a lower risk of problematic behavior later in life (Eisenberg et al., 2010). The development of self-control in children does not occur automatically but is influenced by various factors within the child's developmental environment. Parents play a key role through parenting styles, consistent discipline, and modeling emotional and behavioral regulation (Karreman et al., 2006). In addition to the family, teachers and the school environment also play a strategic role in shaping children's self-control through rules, learning structures, and directed social interactions (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Other factors that shape self-control include the social environment and the learning process. Interactions with peers and the school environment help children learn about rules, discipline, and the ability to restrain impulses. Children also develop self-control through modelling imitating the behavior of parents or adults around them as well as through reinforcement in the form of rewards or consequences for specific behaviors (Marthen, 2018).

In addition to environmental factors, a child's characteristics also contribute to the development of self-control. Social learning processes, observational skills, and experiences with behavioral reinforcement enable children to gradually internalize self-control strategies (Bandura, 1991). Therefore, understanding the factors that contribute to the development of self-control is crucial for designing effective interventions to support optimal child development.

Based on the research outlined above, this study aims to systematically synthesize empirical evidence on the factors shaping self-control in children and to examine the dynamic interactions between these factors throughout the developmental process (Gunawan, 2017).. While prior studies have explored self-control, existing reviews tend to focus on specific dimensions in isolation such as cognitive processes, parenting practices, or behavioral outcomes without providing an integrative framework that captures the interaction between internal and external determinants. In addition, limited attention has been given to age-specific patterns in childhood development and to the methodological variation across recent empirical studies.

To address these gaps, this study employs a systematic

review approach combined with critical appraisal and thematic synthesis to integrate findings from recent literature. Specifically, this review focuses on evidence published within the 2020–2025 period, thereby capturing the most up-to-date developments in the field. By synthesizing both internal factors (e.g., emotional regulation, cognitive control) and external influences (e.g., parenting, school environment, and social context), this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how self-control develops in children. Therefore, the main contribution of this review lies in its integrative perspective, which bridges previously fragmented findings, highlights the interaction between multiple determinants, and provides an updated evidence base that can inform interventions aimed at improving children's self-control based on its underlying causal factors (Baumeister, Roy F.; Vohs, 2007).

Methods

This study employs a systematic review design to identify, assess, and synthesize empirical evidence regarding factors influencing self-control in children. The reporting process adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which serve as the reporting standard to ensure transparency and completeness. The review protocol was not registered in a public repository. However, all procedures including research objectives and questions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, search strategies, and methods for data selection and synthesis—were established prior to data collection. No significant deviations from the planned protocol occurred during the conduct of the review. The review was guided by the research question: “What factors influence the development of self-control in children?” Eligibility criteria included: (1) a population of children aged 4–12 years; (2) a focus on factors influencing self-control; (3) empirical study designs (quantitative or qualitative); (4) publication in English

or Indonesian; and (5) a publication timeframe of 2020–2025.

A literature search was conducted on March 12, 2026, via Google Scholar using the Boolean search string: (“self-control” OR “selfregulation” OR “self-regulation”) AND (“children” OR “child” OR “earlychildhood”) AND (“factors” OR “influencingfactors” OR “determinants”). The search was restricted to the 2020–2025 period and the English and Indonesian languages, focusing on the top 200 results sorted by relevance. To enhance completeness, a manual search of the reference lists of selected articles was also performed. All search results were exported to and managed using Rayyan software to facilitate a systematic screening process. Study selection was conducted in three stages title, abstract, and full-text review—by two independent reviewers to minimize selection bias. Any differences of opinion between reviewers at each stage of the selection process were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached. Duplicate detection was performed using Rayyan's features and manually verified based on title, author, publication year, and source. No identical duplicates were found among the initial 200 records. Google Scholar was selected as the primary source due to its extensive coverage of various types of interdisciplinary scholarly publications, as well as its ability to accommodate publications in both English and Indonesian that met the study's inclusion criteria.

A study selection flowchart was developed based on PRISMA guidelines to systematically illustrate the processes of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. During the identification phase, 200 records were retrieved from Google Scholar. Additionally, a duplicate check was conducted using Rayyan software, and no identical duplicates were found. In the screening phase, the 200 records were evaluated based on their titles and abstracts; 170 records were excluded due to a lack of relevance to the research topic (e.g., not addressing self-control or involving populations outside the specified age range). Consequently, 30 reports were sought for further review in full-text format. During the eligibility assessment phase, these 30 full-text reports

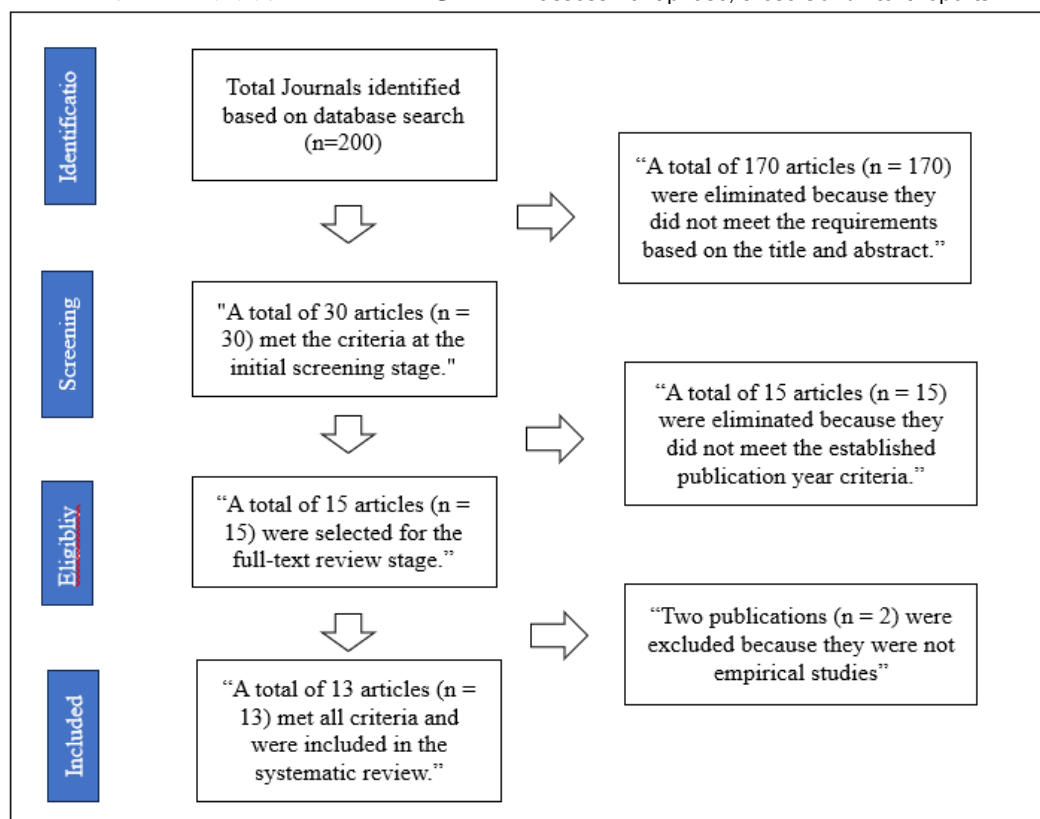


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Table 1. Key Findings from Reviewed Literature

No	Author and year	Subject	Country	Study Design	Age Range	research result
1	(Anggraini & Emmanuel, 2020)	24 participants: 21 parents and 3 teachers held at PAUD Tunas Bangsa Krebet Bululawang.	Indonesia	Descriptive qualitative	4-12 years old	The role of parents, environmental management, modeling, reinforcement, mentoring
2	(Auriza et al., 2023)	The subjects in this study consisted of 10 children	Indonesia	Ethnomethodological	5-6 years old	Parental education, mentoring, providing examples, direction, advice; external cultural influences; social interaction.
3	(Kurniawan & Alghadari, 2023)	170 participants: 6th-grade students (N=24) selected purposively and elementary school students in grades 4-6 (N=146)	Indonesia	Quantitative	9-12 years old	Productive study habits and effective study strategies
4	(Khairunnisa et al., 2025)	10 participants: elementary school (SD) age children	Indonesia	Descriptive qualitative	7-12 years old	Age, emotional regulation, school environment, confrontation techniques
5	(Lawler et al., 2023)	120 children	Amerika Serikat	Quantitative	4-8 years old	Attention control, hot inhibitory control, parent report
6	(Lawler et al., 2024)	Early childhood	Amerika Serikat	Quantitative	4-6 years old	Emotion regulation, attention control, executive function, early social environment
7	(Abrar et al., 2024)	Principal, homeroom teacher, Islamic Religious Education teacher and students	Indonesia	Descriptive qualitative	7-12 years old	Authoritative, authoritarian, permissive parenting styles
8	(Rahma et al., 2024)	4 participants: children from the Musa group (TK A) at Dinnov Al-Birru Ngadiluwih Kindergarten, Kediri Regency	Indonesia	Descriptive qualitative	4-6 years old	Expression puzzle media, play stimulation, social experience
9	(Surawan & Norvia, 2022)	15 participants: 13 sixth grade students of Tangkiling 3 Public Elementary School, 1 Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher, and 1 resource person from outside the school (IAIN Palangka Raya).	Indonesia	Qualitative	11-12 years old	Parent & teacher guidance, role model,
10	(Suryadi et al., 2024)	street children	Indonesia Cross-sectional	Quantitative	9- 12 years old	Socioeconomic status has a direct effect on self-control, parenting styles influence self-control
11	(Fatimah & Yanti, 2025)	240 elementary school students in grades IV, V, and VI from SDN Karang Anom I, II, and III in Cirebon City	Indonesia	Quantitative	9- 12 years old	Resilience, internal emotional regulation, school social environment
12	(Sobrina & Ahmad Asrof Fitri, 2023)	The subjects were all sixth grade elementary school students	Indonesia	Qualitative	11- 12 years old	Teacher role models, religious activities, school discipline, family & social environment
13	(Xu et al., 2025)	453 research subjects who were children	China	Quantitative	4-12 years old	Executive function, emotional regulation, parenting, school environment, age

underwent a thorough evaluation. Of these, 15 reports were excluded for failing to meet inclusion criteria for the following

reasons: falling outside the publication period (n = 10) and not focusing on factors influencing self-control (n = 5).

Furthermore, a comprehensive reading of the articles revealed two additional articles ($n = 2$) that did not employ an empirical research design. Ultimately, 13 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis. This process ensured that the study selection was conducted transparently, systematically, and replicably, in accordance with PRISMA standards. (Page et al., 2021).

Result and Discussion

Internal Factors

This review encompasses 13 studies focusing on the factors that shape self-control in children. In terms of characteristics, the majority of the studies employed a quantitative descriptive approach, complemented by a few qualitative and ethnomethodological studies. Self-control in children is understood as a self-regulation ability formed through a contextual, ongoing development process involving various developmental environments (Fatimah & Yanti, 2025). This ability encompasses a child's capacity to manage emotions, control impulses, delay gratification, and direct behavior in accordance with social demands and prevailing norms. During development, self-control does not emerge instantly, but rather develops gradually along with a child's cognitive and emotional growth, as well as learning experiences gained from daily interactions. Several studies consistently show that self-control is not solely a result of maturation, but rather a product of a complex interaction between internal and external factors. Internal factors include temperament, executive function capacity, and a child's emotional regulation skills. Meanwhile, external factors include the family environment, parenting styles, school climate, and coaching strategies implemented in daily life (Surawan & Norvia, 2022). The family environment, for example, plays a crucial role in establishing the foundation of self-control through the application of discipline, modeling behavior, and the quality of the attachment between parents and children.

From an internal perspective, a child's socio-emotional development and emotion regulation serve as a crucial foundation for the development of self-control. (Rahma et al., 2024) reported that low self-control in early childhood is linked to limited ability in recognizing and managing emotions. Emotionally immature children tend to exhibit impulsive behavior and impatience, and they struggle to adhere to rules. These findings also indicate that self-control is a developing trait that can change in response to stimulation; thus, emotion regulation can be understood as a psychological mechanism contributing to the process of developing self-control. Furthermore, (Rahma et al., 2024) conducting a study with a qualitative design reported improvements in emotion recognition and self-control behaviors following the use of learning media based on emotional experiences, such as expression-based puzzle games. These results revealed observable changes such as increased patience, discipline, and responsibility in the children although a direct cause-and-effect relationship cannot be definitively concluded. Overall, the findings suggest an association between the development of self-control and children's engagement in activities that integrate cognitive and emotional aspects, as opposed to one-way instructional approaches.

(Lawler et al., 2024) emphasized that self-control in children is closely related to the ability to regulate behavior and emotions, which develops through daily experiences and consistent reinforcement from the environment. This ability reflects the extent to which a child is able to manage internal impulses, adjust responses to situational demands, and maintain behavior that aligns with prevailing social norms. In

this context, repeated and structured experiences form an important foundation in developing adaptive self-regulation patterns in children. Children who grow up in environments that provide clear structure, consistent rules, and predictable responses from adults tend to demonstrate more optimal self-control development. Consistency in the application of rules and consequences helps children understand the relationship between behavior and its impact, allowing them to learn to internalize control over their own actions. Conversely, children who live in environments that lack direction, consistency, or minimal supervision tend to struggle to develop effective self-regulation skills, which can lead to impulsive behavior and difficulty managing emotions (Lawler et al., 2024).

School and Social Environmental Factors

From an external perspective, the school environment emerges as a strategic context in developing children's self-control. Research by (Surawan & Norvia, 2022) shows that systematic moral development in elementary schools can shape students' self-control through the internalization of moral values, discipline, and responsibility. This development not only impacts behavioral compliance but also changes students' mindsets and life principles, reflecting a shift from external control to internal self-regulation. These findings are reinforced by the findings of (Fatimah & Yanti, 2025), who emphasized that the effectiveness of self-control development in schools is greatly influenced by the consistency of educators' approaches and a supportive psychological climate. A safe, relational, and communicative learning environment allows children to develop self-control more adaptively. Conversely, approaches that overemphasize punishment and compliance tend to produce self-control that is superficial and not sustainable in the long term.

Furthermore, the school environment also contributes to the development of self-control through social interactions with peers, classroom rules, and learning approaches that emphasize strengthening self-regulation. Teachers act as role models and facilitators, helping children understand the consequences of their actions and encouraging them to develop more mature decision-making skills. Consistent coaching strategies, such as providing positive reinforcement, emotional management training, and fostering disciplined behavior, have proven effective in enhancing children's self-control skills. Furthermore, the development of self-control in children is also influenced by the quality of their experiences in various social contexts. Children who live in supportive, responsive environments that provide opportunities for learning from their experiences tend to demonstrate better self-regulation skills than children who live in less supportive environments. Therefore, understanding self-control needs to be viewed as a multidimensional process involving synergy between individual and environmental factors, so that efforts to develop it must be carried out comprehensively and sustainably.

Educational environmental factors also play a role in developing children's self-control. Research on elementary school students at Haurgeulis Elementary School (SD PUI) showed that self-control is influenced by routines, school rules, and the support of a structured learning environment (Sobrina & Ahmad Asrof Fitri, 2023). Children in a conducive and disciplined educational environment demonstrate better self-control skills in the learning process. This suggests that schools play a role as a reinforcing environment in the development of children's self-control after family. (Kurniawan & Alghadari, 2023) identified that elementary school students' self-control in online learning is built through productive study habits and effective study strategies. These factors reflect children's ability to manage time, control distractions, and maintain consistent learning behavior. These findings confirm that self-control does not emerge spontaneously but is formed through repeated self-

regulation practices in daily learning activities (Kurniawan & Alghadari, 2023).

In addition to learning habits, the role of educators is also a significant external factor in developing children's self-control. (Abrar et al., 2024) showed that teachers, particularly Islamic Religious Education teachers, play a role in developing students' self-control through behavioral habits, cognitive control, and decision-making. Structured activities such as regular religious activities and the implementation of school discipline help children internalize the value of self-control. Thus, the school environment functions as a social space that strengthens the development of self-control through role models and consistent rules (Abrar et al., 2024).

Family and Parenting Factors

In addition to school, family involvement also plays a significant role in developing children's self-control. Studies analyzed show that successful development at school is more optimal when supported by the family environment. (Surawan & Norvia, 2022) emphasized that parental involvement in instilling the values of discipline and self-control at home strengthens the internalization of self-control established at school. This suggests that continuity of values between school and family is a crucial prerequisite for the development of children's self-control. Interaction with peers serves as a strengthening or inhibiting factor for self-control. Children in supportive and structured social environments tend to demonstrate increased self-control, while permissive or less directed environments have the potential to weaken children's self-control abilities (Fatimah & Yanti, 2025). The development of self-control in children has been linked to family factors, the social environment, and the habituation of behaviors from an early age (Auriza et al., 2023). A study by (Khairunnisa et al., 2025), utilizing a descriptive quantitative design, reported improvements in the self-control levels and emotional stability of elementary school students following the implementation of confrontation techniques. The findings also indicated positive changes in the students' social relationships after the intervention. Furthermore, the observed improvements in self-control and emotional stability coincided with enhanced peer relationship skills and a reduction in conflicts stemming from emotional reactions.

(Auriza et al., 2023), demonstrated that parental involvement in educating and guiding children aged 5–6 plays a crucial role in shaping their ability to control their behavior and emotions. Children who receive guidance, direction, and behavioral examples from their parents tend to exhibit better self-control. This underscores the family as a significant factor in the development of a child's self-control. These findings align with research by (Suryadi et al., 2024), which revealed that parenting styles directly influence a child's self-control. Supportive and responsive parenting provides children with opportunities to learn how to manage their behavior independently within clear boundaries. Family environment and social support also emerge as vital elements in the development of a child's self-control. Findings from a third study indicate that children with a supportive environment tend to possess better self-control capabilities when facing academic and social demands. Environments that provide structure, supervision, and positive reinforcement enable children to learn how to manage their emotions and behavior adaptively. These conditions suggest that self-control develops optimally when children are situated within a sustained support system (Xu et al., 2025). The study further indicates that a child's self-control develops more optimally when parents are able to provide a balance of supervision and emotional support. Thus, the quality of parenting is a key factor in the development of a child's self-control. Beyond the family, environmental factors and behavioral habits also play important roles in the development of self-control. Research

by (Anggraini & Emmanuel, 2020) showed that impulsive behavior in children particularly regarding gadget usage is influenced by environments characterized by minimal boundaries and supervision. Children accustomed to observing and imitating behaviors in their environment without restraint tend to struggle with self-control. Conversely, implementing self-control techniques alongside environmental management can help children learn to control their behavior gradually.

Furthermore, these findings indicate that self-control is not a spontaneous ability or solely determined by biological factors, but rather the result of a continuous learning process. This process involves active interaction between the child and their environment, where the child gradually learns through experience, observation, and feedback from those around them. Therefore, developing self-control requires a systematic and consistent approach, both within the family and school environment, to create conditions that support the development of adaptive self-regulation. Furthermore, the role of parents and educators is crucial in providing a conducive environment for the development of self-control. By modeling good behavior, implementing consistent discipline, and providing adequate emotional support, children can develop the ability to control themselves more effectively. Therefore, efforts to improve self-control in children cannot be achieved instantly but require a continuous, targeted coaching process based on the principles of child development.

Conclusion

Based on the systematic literature review conducted, self-control in children can be understood as a capacity that develops through the interaction of internal and external factors. Findings indicate that emotion regulation is the internal factor most consistently associated with self-control, as it helps children manage impulses and align their behavior with social demands. Meanwhile, other factors such as executive function, temperament, and cognitive maturity also contribute, although results vary across studies. Regarding external factors, consistent and responsive parenting that provides a positive example plays a crucial role in supporting the development of children's self-control. Furthermore, structured school and social environments offer children opportunities to practice and strengthen self-regulation skills through social interaction and the application of rules. In general, children in supportive, structured environments tend to exhibit better self-control than those in less supportive settings. However, the review also reveals variations in methodological approaches, sample characteristics, and reporting quality across studies, meaning the strength of the available evidence is not entirely uniform. Consequently, these findings reflect general trends rather than definitive causal relationships. Overall, fostering self-control in children requires an integrated approach that considers both individual and environmental aspects. Further research is needed to substantiate these findings through more rigorous study designs and more consistent reporting.

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