

Emotional Regulation

What is regulation?

Regulation is the ability to recognize how to manage our thoughts, behaviours, and reactions in response to stress. It helps us remain calm and alert, supporting our ability to respond to what is happening in our environment.

Things that cause children (and adults) “stress” are called stressors. These stressors can vary significantly from child to child. What is considered a stressor for one child may not be a stressor for another child, and what may be a stressor for a child in one moment, may not be a stressor in another moment when the child is in a different physical or emotional state.

Common stressors for children in the early years include:

- The child’s physical and emotional development
- Insufficient sleep
- Poor diet (i.e., high in processed foods)
- Lack of physical activity
- Stressors in the environment (i.e., too much noise, light or crowding)
- Difficulty understanding the patterns and non-verbal aspects of social interaction

To achieve optimal regulation, children use both **self and co-regulation** strategies that develop throughout their lifespan.



Self-regulation is when a child can independently achieve a “just right” emotional state without help from others. Children do learn coping strategies and specific skills to help manage everyday stressors.

Self-regulation is essential to early childhood development. For example, self-regulation helps a child to calm themselves to solve a problem without giving up. It is important to know that babies and toddlers have little ability to self-regulate. Children rely on parents and caregivers to learn how to self-regulate through a process called co-regulation.

Co-regulation is when the child and adult experience “getting calm together.” It is achieved through social interaction and support from caregivers and parents. Co-regulation is nurtured with a warm and a responsive interaction between a caring adult and a child where the adult supports the child to recognize, understand, express, and feel calm.

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Why is optimal regulation important?

Being “regulated” allows the child to manage energy, behaviour, and attention, which helps to achieve goals such as socializations, learning new skills, developing friendships, and completing everyday childhood activities with greater success.

Optimal regulation supports participation in daily activities. It is important to have effective coping strategies to manage stressful events, such as transitions, new experiences, unfamiliar situations, and unexpected changes.

BEING REGULATED	BEING DYSREGULATED
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allows the child to be available for learning and participation• Is the ability to use different strategies to manage emotions and stress• Is feeling “just-right” for the task (i.e., alert for the park, calm to be seated for meals, etc.)• Is influenced by sleep, hunger, health, environment, memories, relationships, interactions, and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is when a too fast or too slow “state” leads to difficulties in organization, attention, and processing (i.e., falling asleep at circle would be a low state whereas jumping and crashing repeatedly during naptime would be a high state)• Can be caused by sudden changes in routines, too challenging or unclear task demands and expectations, activity length being too long, confusing information, or other stressors• May impact the child’s ability to communicate and/or problem solve effectively• Reduces quality of social interactions and attention to tasks• Looks and feels different for everyone

How is regulation achieved?

“There is no such thing as a “quick fix,” or a “one-size-fits-all” solution to building self-regulation in young children. It’s a gradual, educational and experiential process” (Shanker, S. retrieved from: www.selfreg.com).

Helping a child learn regulation skills means actively finding ways for them to cope and

manage energy states (i.e., calming for a story), attention difficulties (i.e., being distracted by background noise), stress (i.e., crying because they can’t have a turn), and behaviour (i.e., taking turns with a toy to problem-solve).

Emotional Regulation

Educators and parents can support regulation by:

1. Being a detective:
 - Try to figure out and track what the child's stressors are
 - Observe the child's preferences or what helps to calm the child
 - Pay close attention and track what might cause the child to have too much or too little energy
2. Match teaching strategies to the child's level:
 - For a child who is overwhelmed by loud noises, use a soft voice to help the child feel comfortable
 - Using less language and more visual supports for routines
3. Adults should model and directly teach the child to use new and effective coping and calming strategies.
4. Ask yourself if the child is calm and "ready" to learn and if their state of being is "just right" before introducing a task, expectation, or activity.
 - Wait, achieve optimal regulation together, and then proceed

Three ways young children achieve optimal regulation

1. **Sensory/Motor Strategies:** rocking, swinging, hugs, physical comfort
2. **Language:** visuals, simple instructions, social stories, emotion words, self-talk
3. **Intellect:** think about the event, make choices based on consequence, self-reflection



For more information on Supportive Transition Strategies:

Calming Strategies for Infants and Toddlers

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/your-calm-is-their-calm-co-regulation-strategies-for-infants-and-toddlers/>

Children's Social Emotional Development starts with Co-Regulation.

Tips for parents and caregivers supporting co-regulation.

<https://www.nichq.org/insight/childrens-social-and-emotional-development-starts-co-regulation>

Self-Regulation resources for educators and parents:

how to support children to recognize, understand, and respond to their stress.

<https://self-reg.ca>