



***Supporting Caregivers with Challenging Children***  
*Strategies and Tools to Help You and Your Child Stay Regulated Together*

## Co-Regulation Basics

### Important Points

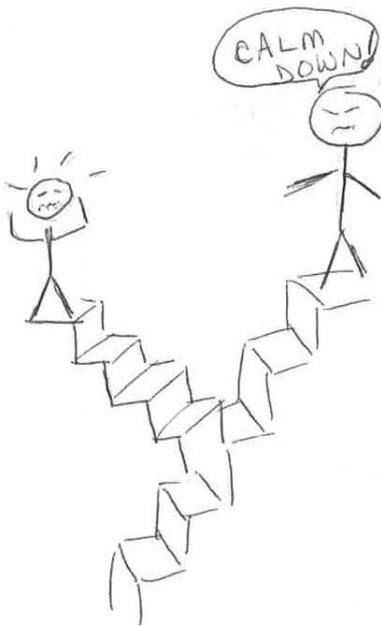
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- **Regulation Review** – Regulation is the ability of our brains to shift so we can do what is necessary in life, especially modulate our moods, self-calm, delay gratification, and tolerate transitions. When regulated you can generally match your energy appropriately to the activity, engage with others, follow directions, and shift between emotions without being stuck. We are not born knowing how to regulate our behaviors and emotions. It typically takes seven (7) years or more for a child to learn self-regulation skills.
- **Co-Regulation Defined** – Co-regulation is how people’s regulatory states affect one another. In the context of children and caregivers, it is the primary way that children learn self-regulation skills. When children are very young, caregivers are providing full support of the child’s regulation. As they grow a little older, caregivers and children co-regulate to support a child’s regulation. This lays the groundworks for a child to build the skills to self-regulate independently.
- **How to Co-Regulate with Your Child** – People, especially children, learn best through relationship. Due to the unique nature of the relationship, children are extremely attuned to and affected by caregivers’ emotions. Children learn regulation by the caregiver modeling how they interact with the child and regulate their own emotions. Being predictable in responding to a child supports regulation skills. Here are some tips for co-regulating.
  - **Label and honor the emotion** – The feelings expressed by a child are authentic. Naming the emotions and validating their experience helps. (“YOU ARE SO FRUSTRATED! It is hard to wait for the thing you want.”). You might also label what you notice about their bodies (e.g. moving fast, red face, clenched fists, etc.) to help them start to make the connection between their bodies, emotions, and actions.
  - **Match the intensity without adding to it** – Changing your voice volume and tone as well as facial expressions to match a child’s state helps them feel like you see and understand them. When dysregulated the brain will register those things in a way that words might not be.
  - **Join your child and be with them in the moment** – Being with your child while distressed creates a sense of safety in the moments of discomfort and dysregulation. This helps the child

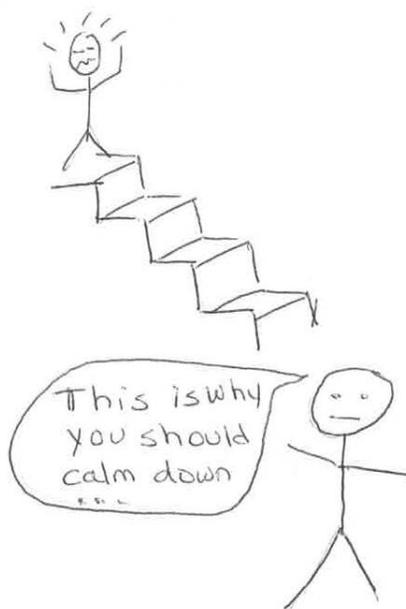
learn how to tolerate distress and be okay experiencing their hard emotions. A moment to pause and “be with” often gives the brain a moment to process, shift, and calm.

- **Set gentle but firm boundaries** – Joining with a child does not mean giving in if they are upset about a limit that has been set.
- **Model recovery** – Show your child how you calm yourself, for example take a deep breath. Often the child will follow your lead. The child’s brain learns what it feels like to be okay again, that in the context of relationship there is an “off ramp” to those moments of dysregulation.
- **Practice, practice, practice** – Regulation skills build gradually, so need lots of repetition through co-regulation to develop. Signs that a child is developing regulation skills include better frustration tolerance, less intense blow-ups, and quicker recoveries.

- **When Parents Cannot Regulate** – Parenting is hard, kids are often frustrating, and we are human. Caregivers are not always going to be well regulated. However, this is also an opportunity to model how to manage dysregulation. Name and model it. (e.g. “I’m feeling very frustrated and need to take a break. I’m going to the next room for a couple of minutes and will be back when I’m calm.”)



Matching Dysregulation  
Dysregulated child dysregulates the caregiver



Mismatched Regulation  
Calm caregiver tries to reason with a dysregulated child



Co-Regulation  
Caregiver joins dysregulated child and supports calming

## A Few Easy Things to Try

- Throughout the day, notice whether you and your child’s regulation states are well matched or different.
- Pay attention to what strategies you are already using when your child is dysregulated. Do you reason with them, tell them to take a breath or calm down, or do you sit with them in the hard emotion for a moment?

- See if you can try to match their emotion and regulation state. Start with joyful moments and see how that feels in your body.

## For More Information

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### Short and Sweet

- Co-Regulation Techniques – <https://pcit.ucdavis.edu/pc-care/handouts-forms/coregulation-screenshot/> (Handout from UC-Davis)
- 9 Tips to Build your Child’s Self-Regulation Skills – <https://stayprepared.sg/mymentalhealth/articles/9-tips-to-build-your-childs-self-regulation-skills/> (Brief article and infographic from National University Hospital)

### Deeper Dives

- ***How to Stop Losing Your Sh\*t with Your Kids: A Practical Guide to Becoming a Calmer, Happier Parent*** by Carla Naumburg (Book)
- ***Caregiver Co-regulation Across Development: A Practice Brief***. By K.D. Rosanbalm, & D.W. Murray, OPRE Brief #2017-80. <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/Co-RegulationFromBirthThroughYoungAdulthood.pdf> (10 page paper with practical tips)

For more information on this and other topics link to the podcast based training series found on our website, [www.ctn-madison.com](http://www.ctn-madison.com)