

What Is Co-Regulation?

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Helping kids regulate their emotions requires managing your own

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Emotions can be volatile. They can prompt us to do or say things that are harmful, hurtful, or just plain regrettable — so we do our best to manage, or regulate, them. Self-regulation looks like taking a deep breath and saying, “Please put your Legos away after you finish playing, so I don’t step on one” instead of scooping up every Lego in your house and chucking them out the window.

As adults, we practice self-regulation all the time in interactions with our co-workers, friends, and partners. It’s not always easy, but we know that it’s more effective and productive to talk about what’s upsetting us rather than to just react.

But [self-regulation](#) is not innate; it’s a set of skills everyone must learn. Developmentally, kids are like cars with faulty brakes, born with the capacity to experience every shade of emotion but none of the tools to regulate them.

What is co-regulation?

Co-regulation is a mutual act, an exchange of calm that occurs between two people. But when it comes to adults (who have acquired the cognitive tools to manage their emotions) and children, co-regulation also means helping a child learn how to

regulate their own emotions by showing empathy and modeling calmness. Co-regulation does not mean pretending to exist in a state of calm all the time or never getting angry. It means actively managing your own emotions to help kids learn to manage theirs.

Co-regulation is both something you actively do as well as a biological process — it happens in your body. [Research](#) shows that we can directly influence certain processes in one another, such as the production of a stress hormone called cortisol. The distress of others — say, a wailing child — can cause us to feel similar distress. And when we remain calm, we can influence the production of hormones in others to help them calm down too.

Co-regulation has recently become a [buzzword](#) in parenting circles, but LaKisha Hoffman, MSW, first encountered the concept as an assistant school principal in Richmond, California. “Students would come to me and be like, ‘Oh, my teacher did this.’ Then the teacher would also come to me and be like, ‘Oh, the student did this and this,’” she recalls.

Teachers seemed to find that kids’ behaviors set off their own emotions in ways that were difficult to control. “Some teachers were triggered by students getting up and walking around,” Hoffman says. “Some were triggered by students who were talking out of turn. Some were triggered by students who were challenging them.”

Hoffman, who is now the senior director of School and Community Programs at the Child Mind Institute, could empathize with teachers’ frustrations. But she also recognized that, as adults, teachers had a greater responsibility to be aware of their own triggers so they could support and engage with students even when they acted out.

Co-regulation begins with self-regulation

For adults — parents, caretakers, or teachers — co-regulation begins with self-regulation. Everyone is shaped by their own personal experiences. “We’re all human,” Hoffman says. “Different things set us off as adults. How do we recognize those things? How do we cope, soothe ourselves in those moments? That’s the first step.”

Hoffman, a former college basketball player, coaches several youth teams. She recognizes that one of her triggers is when a child bounces a ball while she’s talking. It’s a small thing, but Hoffman knows from experience that it bothers her. “But I can’t just be like, ‘STOP bouncing the basketball,’” she says. “I can’t interact with them like that. I have to be calm in that moment and say, ‘Hey, what’s happening now? Are you supposed to be bouncing the ball?’ I have to build a culture for them to understand why they shouldn’t do that.”

Know your stress responses

Humans have evolved stress responses to help us respond to danger, but those responses can be triggered by stress even when it isn't life-threatening. Perhaps you've heard the term *fight-or-flight*? Other stress responses include *freeze* and the lesser-known *fawn* (appeasing someone to avoid conflict). Say your child throws a tantrum in the grocery store because you took their iPad away. So, you give it back to avoid a scene. This is a fawn response. Fawn responses are also common among people who have experienced trauma, such as abuse.

Is your instinct to yell when your child upsets you (fight)? Instead, do you tend to walk away (flight) or are their reactions sometimes so overwhelming that you get mentally "stuck" and shut down (freeze)? Stress responses can become ingrained. But when you can recognize why you react to something that upsets you a certain way, you can find better ways to cope.

Reach for a strategy

The phrase "take a deep breath" is a cliché for fighting stress. But decades of [research](#) show that deep breathing has profound effects on the regions of the brain that govern emotion and cognition. We tend to breathe too fast (hyperventilate) when we panic, so techniques to slow breathing can help us calm down. Even a few deep breaths can kick-start the process. Some specific techniques include belly breathing, [box breathing](#), and [butterfly breathing](#) — a particularly good exercise to do with kids.

Of course, you can always just gulp in more air, but the purpose of deep breathing is really [self-awareness](#). When we step outside of ourselves and acknowledge that yes, we are in fact quite angry, we are taking the first step toward controlling the anger — or whatever emotion we're feeling.

Recognizing dysregulation in kids

When adults can identify their own triggers and stress responses, they are better equipped to recognize them in kids.

Emotional dysregulation can look different depending on the person and situation. For a lot of kids, particularly young kids, dysregulation might look like screaming, stomping feet, or pounding fists on the floor. But consider fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Dysregulation can also look like withdrawing, [overcompliance with adults](#), or an inability to say "no."

And dysregulation can escalate. "If I get worked up and kids are looking at me, then they all get worked up," says Hoffman. "Then we've just got a whole bunch of worked up people. How do we problem solve in that moment?"

The goal of co-regulation is to reverse course, to de-escalate intensifying stress.

Co-regulation strategies

Not all co-regulation is conscious. Our bodies and brains can respond to others without us even realizing it. That said, there are actions we can take to cue the process. Much like the way deep breathing sends a message to your brain to calm down, there are things you can do to send a similar message to another person's body.

Whether you're a teacher or a caregiver, it's important to teach kids strategies for calming down, like deep breathing exercises, before you need to reach for them in a crisis. When our emotions are out of whack, we can't easily focus on or process new information because our brains are too busy dealing with the stress.

Let's say a child is having a meltdown. They're collapsed in a puddle on the floor, hiccup-sobbing and struggling to catch their breath. The first thing you need to do is take stock of your own physical reaction — Is your heart beating faster? Do you feel your face getting hot? — and take a few deep breaths. Relax your body, then:

Get on their level. When a child feels overwhelmed, it's tough to help them calm down when you're towering over them. If you can, get close to eye level and look them in the eyes. Research shows that eye contact fosters trust and connectedness. Eye contact can help kids feel safe. But it's also important to note that some kids with autism can be hypersensitive to direct eye contact. so it's best to take your cues from the individual child.

- **Name their emotion.** For example: "It looks like you're really upset, right now." Labeling a child's emotion lets kids know explicitly that you can see what they might be feeling. You're validating the emotion here, not the behavior — it's okay to feel bad. Labeling also teaches them to notice and name their own emotions, which for very young kids is not intuitive.
- **Change your tone.** Be sure to keep your tone calm, and don't raise your voice. Trying your best to sound relaxed can be a powerful disruptor when a child is upset because we tend to imitate the behaviors we see in others. This "mirroring" happens subconsciously, as a product of mirror neurons in the brain. And there is [growing evidence](#) that suggests mirror neurons play an important role in how we learn and express empathy.

- **Give them a hug or a squeeze.** When children are extremely dysregulated, they might be sensitive or even averse to touch. But if a child is consenting to touch, it is a potent tool in the co-regulation toolkit. Touching another person can boost their oxytocin levels. Oxytocin, sometimes called the “love hormone,” makes us feel good. It also perpetuates its own release, meaning that a hug or a hand squeeze can have a positive effect that outlasts the action itself.
- **Guide them in a calming exercise.** If there is a [calming](#) or breathing exercise that the child is familiar with — maybe you learned it together, maybe they learned it in school — suggest you do it together. Don’t be deterred if they say no. Say you’d like to do the exercise because it helps you calm down (it’s helpful, especially with very young kids, to reinforce what these exercises are actually for) and start doing it yourself. They may just watch you; they may join in. In the end, either outcome is valuable.

We are imperfect beings. We won’t always offer the best or most mindful response when we’re upset but making the effort to be aware of our own emotions and behaviors sets a powerful example for kids. Whatever your specific process, the most important takeaway of co-regulation is that kids absorb what they see you do — and it may be easier for them to calm down if you show them how to do it. As Hoffman says, “The best way to teach is to model.”

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