



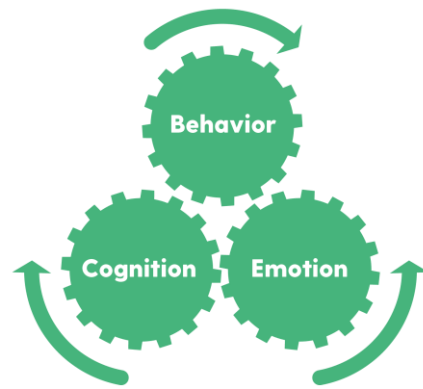
What is Self-Regulation?

And why does it matter?

Self-Regulation is the act of managing our thoughts and feelings, so we behave in ways that help us reach our goals.

Self-Regulation matters because it enables us to...

- Handle stress in our jobs and relationships
- Resist immediate gratification
- Avoid quick decisions we later regret
- Make short- and long-term plans
- Solve problems
- Be more effective partners, parents, practitioners, and peers



Emotional Self-Regulation:

- Self-calming strategies
- Labeling, expressing, and managing emotions
- Tolerating appropriate levels of distress or discomfort
- Mindfulness
- Identifying, challenging, and changing unhelpful feelings or thoughts
- Empathy and compassion



Cognitive Self-Regulation:

- Resisting temptations and impulsive actions
- Choosing what to focus on
- Working memory
- Adapting to new circumstances
- Perspective taking
- Transition from thinking about one concept to another
- Problem solving and decision making
- Goal setting (short and long term) and goal commitment
- Planning



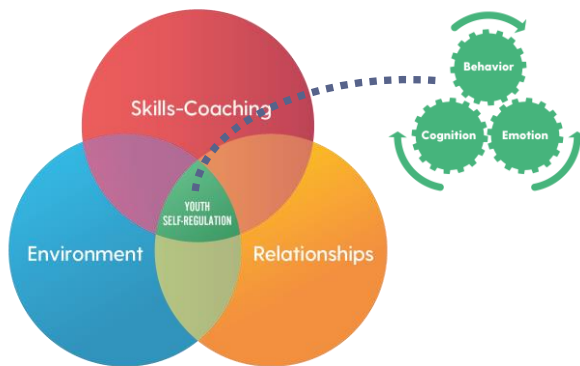
Behavioral Self-Regulation:

- Organization of time and materials
- Healthy coping (breathing, exercise, self-care)
- Persistence in the face of Intense or difficult emotions
- Delaying gratification
- Conflict resolution
- Pro-social or cooperative and compassionate communication



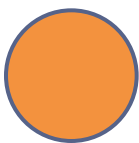
Co-Regulation: *A framework for transformative impacts*

Co-Regulation – support from adults that prioritizes warm relationships and nurturing environments as the context for coaching and modeling self-regulation skills.



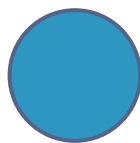
Ask yourself, do the people in my care...

- *Believe I care about them and know I am there if they need me? Do they feel welcome?*
- *Feel safe to be themselves? Are they able to focus on learning?*
- *See me modeling good management of thoughts, feelings, and behavior? Do I work with them – coach them – in times of intense emotion or stress?*



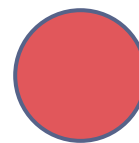
Warm, Responsive Relationships:

- Respond with warmth and affection, avoid harsh, judgmental or shaming remarks
- Validate; offer support during intense emotion
- Share perspective; allow them to make decisions and experience natural consequences
- Show and encourage compassion for self and others



Safe, Supportive Environments

- Co-create values that promote safety and positive contexts and environments
- Incentivize good choices (e.g. those who accomplish goals receive something)
- Offer anticipatory guidance as they navigate their own environments
- Offer space and time to calm down in times of arousal, conflict, or stress (e.g. create a refuel zone)
- Provide prompts for skill use (e.g. posters, notes)



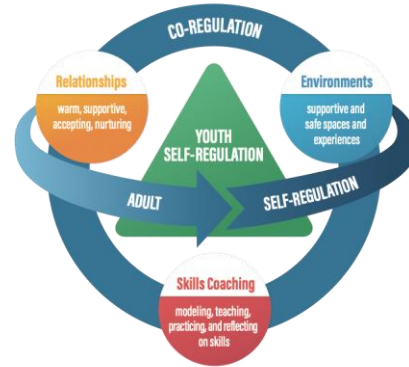
Modeling and Coaching Skills

- Coach awareness of emotions and their value
- Coach stress management and distress tolerance; self-calming
- Encourage help-seeking
- Support goal-setting and monitor progress, support persistence
- Coach problem-solving
- Coach decision-making that aligns with values



Explore, Plan, Take ACTION!

Imagine what is possible if we all adopt a co-regulation mindset as parents, partners, providers, and peers!



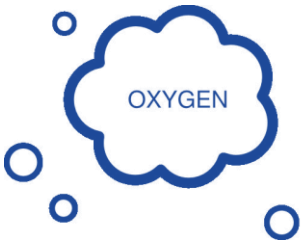
ACTION:



ACTION:



ACTION:



ACTION:





Building Staff Co-Regulation to Support Healthy Relationships in Youth

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Who is this guide for?

Project directors and practitioners providing relationship education for youth and young adults

Goals

- Help programs integrate the science of self-regulation development into existing services through co-regulation—the interactive process of adult support for youth self-regulation
- Inspire programs to embed a co-regulation framework and strategies into their service delivery approach
- Share practical takeaways and lessons learned from one co-regulation project to help guide the integration of co-regulation into other programs





Overview

Self-regulation, the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed behavior, is fundamental to healthy relationships and lifelong well-being. We learn to self-regulate through interactions with the people and places around us. Self-regulation is of great interest to those who study adolescence because it is linked to academic achievement, social competence, positive peer relationships, and overall well-being. Emerging research on the brain points to adolescence as a critical period for self-regulation development and a salient time for intervention. Targeted support from adults who care for and work with youth can enhance self-regulation development.

As part of a nationwide initiative to promote healthy relationships in adult individuals, couples, and youth, the federal Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) funds comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services.

Youth programs can improve young people's attitudes, knowledge, and expectations of romantic relationships by helping them develop key skills to form healthy relationships (and avoid unhealthy ones). The Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM) project was funded through a collaboration between OFA and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) with the aim of further advancing relationship health and self-sufficiency by applying a developmental framework to human services. The SARHM team, including researchers from Public Strategies and Mathematica advised by self-regulation and youth experts, collaborated with OFA-funded, youth-serving grantees to develop and pilot test evidence-informed strategies to boost youth self-regulation. The strategies were designed to integrate with pre-existing programs regardless of the specific





curricula used and without altering program content. The goal of the strategies was to build the capacity of youth program facilitators to integrate self-regulation support into the delivery of relationship education curricula.

This guide begins by explaining how self-regulation underlies success in many areas of life and why adolescence is a crucial time for caring adults—like HMRE practitioners—to offer self-regulation support. We introduce the concept of co-regulation, a process through which adults create safe spaces and nurturing relationships as the context for coaching the use of self-regulation skills that promote youths' healthy development. The guide explains how integrating co-regulation approaches into youth service delivery may improve program implementation and youth outcomes. At the end of the document, you will find information from the SARHM project on specific strategies and resources you can use to improve co-regulation in your program.





Highlights from this guide



Self-regulation is fundamental to healthy relationships and is therefore a key target for youth-focused relationship education.



Youth experience critical brain development that is enhanced by adult co-regulation support. Co-regulation is the supportive process between caring adults and youth that fosters self-regulation. Co-regulation includes developing and maintaining warm relationships, collaborating with youth to co-create supportive environments, and coaching and modeling the use of skills that promote self-regulation.



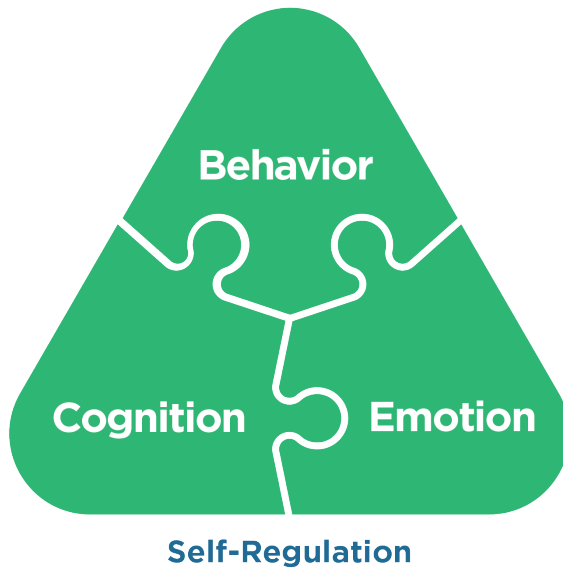
Integrating a co-regulation framework (see **Figure 2**) and teaching program staff to provide co-regulation support may improve youth and program outcomes. For example, when facilitators welcome and check in with each individual youth (developing warm relationships) or allow youth to establish and practice group values (co-creating a supportive environment), they may enhance youth engagement and learning. See **Figure 3** for more strategies, and the **Steps for Applying the Co-Regulation Model** resource at the end of this guide.



The SARHM project provides examples of how programs can adopt a co-regulation framework. Programs can follow the SARHM approach if they (1) review OPRE's self-regulation resources, (2) examine current practices for opportunities to enhance relationships, environments, and skills-coaching, and (3) collaborate with frontline staff to test and refine co-regulation strategies for use in workshops and the workplace.



What is self-regulation and why is it an important focus for HMRE programs?



Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts, feelings, and behavior in the moment and over time in order to achieve our goals. It includes skills like impulse control, managing stress and anger, decision-making, and problem-solving. When we self-regulate, we act in our long-term best interest, return to a calm state when experiencing intense feelings, and stay true to our deepest values. Self-regulation is foundational to success in many areas, including relationships, employment, physical and emotional health, and community well-being. We learn to self-regulate through experiences in supportive environments and relationships. **Figure 1** highlights skills that youth can develop when they receive key types of support from adults.

FIGURE 1

SELF-REGULATION SKILLS THAT DEVELOP WITH ADULT CO-REGULATION SUPPORT

01 Cognitive skills

including flexibility, perspective-taking, effective in-the-moment and long-term decision-making, organization, time management, task completion, longer-term goal-setting, and self-monitoring to achieve goals

02 Emotional skills

including noticing and managing strong or unpleasant feelings, empathy, and compassion for self and others

03 Behavioral skills

including delaying gratification, persistence, self-calming, and controlling impulses in order to achieve goals

Although the term makes it sound internal to an individual, self-regulation develops through interactions with caring adults, like parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors.

The supportive process between adults and youth that fosters self-regulation development is called co-regulation.

Adapted from Murray et al., 2016.



Why is it important for HMRE staff to understand self-regulation and co-regulation?

HMRE practitioners may be able to boost youth engagement, learning, and program delivery through intentional support of youths' self-regulation. The conditions that promote self-regulation development—such as forming positive relationships with staff and other program participants—can enhance engagement by increasing youths' motivation and focus. Such conditions are linked to better uptake of content, which in turn supports the development of healthy relationships.

To foster co-regulation in HMRE programs, supervisors can examine the relationships between facilitators and participants, the program environment, and the presence of distinct components of self-regulation skills coaching in their service delivery.

With these qualities in mind, staff can be trained to:

- Relate warmly and nonjudgmentally toward participants (and each other) and respond to their needs with encouragement;
- Create nurturing environments that promote dignity and engender a sense of safety and belonging;
- Coach participants to use self-regulation skills. **Figure 4** depicts the process of skills coaching, whereby facilitators teach and model a skill, then actively listen to youth and reinforce skill use. They also ensure participants can learn the skill by listening, having opportunities to practice, and engaging in observation and reflection. Coaching may involve helping youth to plan ahead, prioritize values in decision-making, exercise compassion, and find healthy ways to manage intense feelings and cope with stress.

Providing co-regulation support may improve youth engagement because facilitators are focused not only on *what* they are teaching but also on *how* they are teaching it.

Training staff to understand co-regulation and use simple strategies to support youth may be a powerful way to enhance program fidelity and improve program outcomes. Furthermore, helping youth develop and practice self-regulation skills is particularly important during adolescence, a critical period of rapid brain development and acquisition of new skills (see box below).



CRITICAL BRAIN DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE REQUIRES CONTINUED ADULT SUPPORT

Adolescence: A developmental period that begins with the onset of puberty (as early as age 9 or 10) and continues through the mid-to late-twenties.

The ongoing support of caring adults is crucial for youth during adolescence. As the bodies of adolescents mature, they also change neurobiologically and socially in ways that stimulate their development into capable and connected adults.

- Neurobiologically, the brain enters a period of rapid growth during adolescence, forming new connections and pathways. Each new experience forms new circuits in the brain, and those connections become more permanent as experiences are repeated and practiced. The areas of the brain that mature first enable youth to interpret interpersonal and emotional cues and take risks. This fosters a sense of connection with peers, promotes romantic relationships, and is necessary for independence and individual identity. Maturing later are the areas of the brain that make it easier to set long-term goals, understand the perspectives of others, form long-term commitments, and make complex decisions. These skills align with family formation, parenting, employment, and relationship stability.
- Socially, youth begin to separate from parents and guardians to become more independent. Meanwhile, they prioritize relationships with peers and test the waters of romantic relationships as a precursor to their own family and community formation. More is expected of them too from family members and from social institutions. An adolescent at age 13 is expected to engage in longer and more in-depth conversations than an 8-year-old. A 17-year-old can enlist in the military and head to combat. Though brain development is ongoing, at age 18 youth are legally considered adults suddenly gaining rights and responsibilities related to privacy, voting, marriage, investing money, signing contracts, and gambling, each adding accountability and risk.





As a result of these changes, adolescents experience intense emotions and may only see the immediate rewards of a choice instead of also seeing the impact on long-term goals. For example, they may act “in the moment” in ways that help them feel connected to peers, even if the behavior could endanger long-term goals, health, or well-being. Adolescents are also more susceptible to stress but less experienced in managing it on their own.

When youth experience chronic stressors and/or trauma such as poverty, maltreatment, food insecurity, violence, natural disasters, and national emergencies, the brain development that allows them to manage thoughts, feelings, and behavior can be seriously affected.

Without the support of caring adults, the nervous system can be overwhelmed by stress hormones, causing reactivity and delaying the growth of self-regulation pathways in the brain. This can manifest as behavior that is more disruptive, impulsive, confusing, or risky. When youth exhibit such behaviors, it can be difficult for adults to connect with and support them. Yet, it is during times of increased stress that youth need adult support more than ever. For more information on adolescent development and the impact of stress, see the Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series report on the review of studies of self-regulation and stress (Hamoudi et al., 2015) or OPRE’s Self-Regulation Snapshots by age group.

Caring adults who work with youth, such as those who teach relationship education, can recognize this period as an opportunity and respond in vital ways that foster healthy relationships and individual growth. Science explains how to do this by supporting self-regulation development.

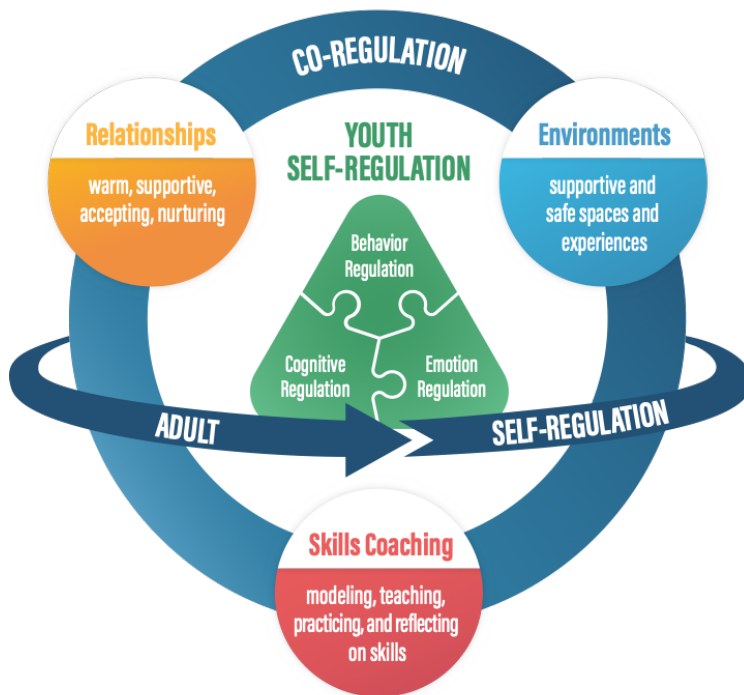


Understanding co-regulation: A model

Caring adults influence self-regulation development in youth by fostering supportive relationships and nurturing environments as a context for learning and practicing self-regulation skills. This means HMRE practitioners, as caring adults, are a critical piece of the picture. Practitioners' approach and the program culture they foster impacts how youth learn.

The co-regulation framework pictured in **Figure 2** shows the important influence of adult self-regulation and co-regulation on youth self-regulation. In the center, the green triangle represents youth self-regulation. At the base of the triangle are the skills to manage thoughts (cognitive regulation) and feelings (emotion regulation). These skill sets promote behavior regulation (top of

FIGURE 2
CO-REGULATION FRAMEWORK*



* The evidence-based co-regulation framework is an adaptation of existing models of self-regulation (Murray et al., 2019) and co-regulation (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

the triangle) which combine to foster short- and long-term goal attainment. The blue donut contains the three key elements of co-regulation that staff can implement in their work with youth: warm, responsive relationships (orange); safe, supportive environments (blue); and self-regulation skills coaching (red). The depiction of adult self-regulation surrounding the pieces of the model indicates that when staff are able to manage their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, they are more effective co-regulators for the youth they serve.



Adult self-regulation: Support for the adults who support youth

Reflecting on the importance of the arrow in **Figure 2**, adults are encouraged to consider ways to strengthen their own self-regulation when providing co-regulation support. Maintaining warmth, ensuring a safe environment, and being on-task for skills coaching is not always easy, given the stressors adults face each day. Life events can make it hard for adults to manage their own thoughts, feelings, and in-the-moment reactions. Like the youth they serve, facilitators also need supportive relationships, nurturing environments, and ongoing coaching so they are able to focus more fully on youth when youth need them most.

For more information about co-regulation, see [*Co-Regulation from Birth through Young Adulthood: A Practice Brief, Rosanbalm and Murray, 2017.*](#)

Research says providers are most effective in their work with youth when they are:

- **Aware** of their feelings and responses in stressful situations
- **Notice** their assumptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the behavior of youth and their implications
- **Use** strategies to remain calm and respond with compassion, even when stressed, angry, or upset (e.g., taking deep breaths, practicing positive self-talk, taking a walk)

Teaching HMRE staff to provide co-regulation support may improve youth outcomes

Relationship education is an ideal context to focus on co-regulation. HMRE programs offer life skills during adolescence, when a burst of brain development, peer connection, and independence co-occur for youth. This is a time when social demands increase and adult supports tend to decrease. The relationship information provided and skills taught in HMRE workshops are timely, relevant, and of great interest to youth. The content stimulates opportunities for HMRE facilitators to provide co-regulation support at a point when youth can benefit in lasting ways.

To do this, facilitators can use strategies tailored to enhance the three types of co-regulation support *without changing the curricula being offered to youth*. Thus, the theory of co-regulation becomes the framework that guides how services are delivered, and the strategies become the



vehicle for providing co-regulation support. Through co-regulation, adults create nurturing contexts for youth to acquire self-regulation skills. Improved self-and-co-regulation generate the conditions for optimal learning and curriculum uptake. As a result, co-regulation has the potential to enhance implementation of youth-serving programs and improve program outcomes for youth. In addition, staff benefit from using strategies for their own self-regulation and to improve co-regulation among staff in their workplace. The strategies can promote a positive work environment, reduce stress, and increase role satisfaction. See **Figure 3** for a list of strategies to consider. Building staff capacity for co-regulation is a promising approach to improve youth self-regulation, program implementation, and outcomes for HMRE programs.



The SARHM project: An example of how to integrate co-regulation into existing programs

The SARHM project, funded through a collaboration between OFA and OPRE, aimed to build the capacity of adults providing youth-serving HMRE programs by partnering with two HMRE grantee sites to develop and test strategies that enhance staff support for youth self-regulation development.¹ For more in-depth information about the SARHM project, see the [*SARHM Final Report*](#).

Most youth programs that aim to build self-regulation do so solely by teaching self-regulation skills to youth, but do not simultaneously develop the co-regulation knowledge and skills of the adults who work with youth.

Therefore, the SARHM project specifically targeted frontline staff in HMRE programs and their supervisors as the agents of change. Because this approach was new to the field, the SARHM team began the study by doing formative research—that is, using evidence from the literature and working directly with program staff who would use these strategies to develop and refine them systematically.

The SARHM team started with a thorough review of important publications, including each of the available publications in OPRE’s [*Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series*](#), and conducted a targeted literature review to identify evidence-based or promising strategies that promote staff

¹ The SARHM project team included researchers with expertise in instructional design, implementation science, developmental psychology, rapid cycle evaluation, and HMRE programming.



self-regulation or warm relationships, supportive environments, and self-regulation skills coaching.

- The team found evidence suggesting a variety of approaches, some simpler than others, that could be piloted by HMRE facilitators without altering existing program content. Based on the themes drawn from the literature, the team developed a menu of 23 new strategy ideas that seemed feasible and relevant for HMRE service delivery. Then they discussed the strategies with experts and sites.
- In the next phase, the team interviewed staff at eight HMRE grantee sites and selected two with whom to partner. One site worked with students in four urban high schools. The second site was a community-based organization working with 17- to 23-year-old youth who were formerly in foster care. The project team met in person with representative staff at each site. After giving background on the processes of self-regulation and co-regulation, the SARHM team heard from program staff about their needs and goals, both as staff and for youth. The SARHM team shared the menu of strategy ideas and engaged in a process to select those that each site wanted to further develop and pilot. This allowed the team to develop a variety of approaches tailored to different programs and populations.
- Next, the team used a process called formative rapid-cycle evaluation to apply the co-regulation model to practice. The process involved developing the strategies, systematically gathering feedback from facilitators, observers, and youth, and analyzing data about the implementation of the strategies to make real-time improvements.
- Each site tested strategies in three cycles scheduled to suit their individual program's timeline. During each cycle, staff tried the co-regulation strategies, and the SARHM team collected feedback from staff and observers using self-administered questionnaires and observation forms.² SARHM researchers analyzed the feedback, noted themes, and made targeted improvements to the strategy. The revised strategy was implemented in the next cycle, following the same process.
- The SARHM team and program staff were full partners during the process, engaging in implementation coaching, identifying and trouble-shooting mid-cycle challenges, and providing contemporaneous feedback.

² See the [forthcoming Observation Measures Brief] for information about how to assess for co-regulation through observation.



Co-regulation strategies tested and refined through SARHM

To foster co-regulation in HMRE programs, the SARHM team integrated discrete, targeted strategies that aimed to enhance each category of co-regulation (See Figure 3). Some strategies also aimed to support staff self-regulation or improve the co-regulation between staff in the workplace. Youth-serving programs that wish to foster co-regulation in their work can select one strategy to strengthen facilitator-participant relationships, one to enhance the environment, and a third to improve skills coaching, or focus first on workplace strategies. The *SARHM Co-Regulation in Practice Series* provides additional information and specific resources for using select strategies refined through the project.

FIGURE 3 CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES FOR HMRE PRACTITIONERS





 STRATEGY	 DESCRIPTION
Workplace strategies that promote adult self-regulation or co-regulation focus	
Environment Scan	Staff complete a worksheet on the workplace environment, prompting them to notice and modify stressors and barriers to productivity and focus in their environment.
Take Note, Tag It, Tune In (T3)	Staff pause to notice sensations in the body, identify and write associated feelings, and use pre-identified strategies to tune or manage intense emotions when needed.
Personal Goal-Setting	Staff complete a worksheet on small, achievable goals; identify action steps; encourage use of a “support buddy”; and discuss progress toward individual goals as a team.
Co-regulation Prompts in Supervision	Supervisor selects a self-regulation champion, uses tools for growth mindset in the workplace, and asks targeted questions in meetings to enhance reflection and intention around co-regulation.
Warm, responsive relationships	
Welcoming Strategies	Participants complete a short worksheet on how they prefer facilitators to interact with them. Facilitators greet each participant personally at each workshop and check in individually with 1-2 participants during or after each class.
Positive Praise	In group or individual sessions, facilitators provide either two-part verbal praise (by saying the participant’s name + the specific effort/behavior being praised) or four-part written praise (which includes the participant name + specific behavior + praise effort not natural ability + share the value of that effort to the program or community). In the workplace, staff exchange four-part positive praise notes (name + specific behavior + praise of effort + value to the program or community).



FIGURE 3 CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES FOR HMRE PRACTITIONERS (continued)

 STRATEGY	 DESCRIPTION
Supportive environments	
Group Agreement	Facilitators solicit values from participants that participants want to foster in their group (e.g., inclusive), define each value using specific behaviors (what will be observed when the value is enacted), and obtain visible agreement from each member to uphold the values (e.g., raise your hand or stand if you support these values). Facilitators reference values during every session and allow participants to adjust specifics as needed. Facilitators model and reinforce values and behaviors.
Rest and Return	Participants have permission to take a break if they are experiencing intense emotions or need a physical or mental rest. Participants commit to returning when they feel better. In the workplace, staff establish an area to take a break if they are experiencing intense emotions or need a physical or mental rest. Staff also take breaks if needed while working with participants in the community.
Skills coaching	
Bookending	Facilitators end the session with active practice of a self-regulation skill from the curriculum or planning time for its use; subsequently, facilitators begin the next session with a prompt to reflect on the use of that skill since the last session.
Breath to Refocus	Facilitators coach participants to use deep breaths to regain focus during transitions or times of intense emotion and models the exercise by doing it with participants.
Take Note	Participants practice brief mindfulness or “noticing” exercises in the sessions or individually. Staff practice these exercises as a group or individually.





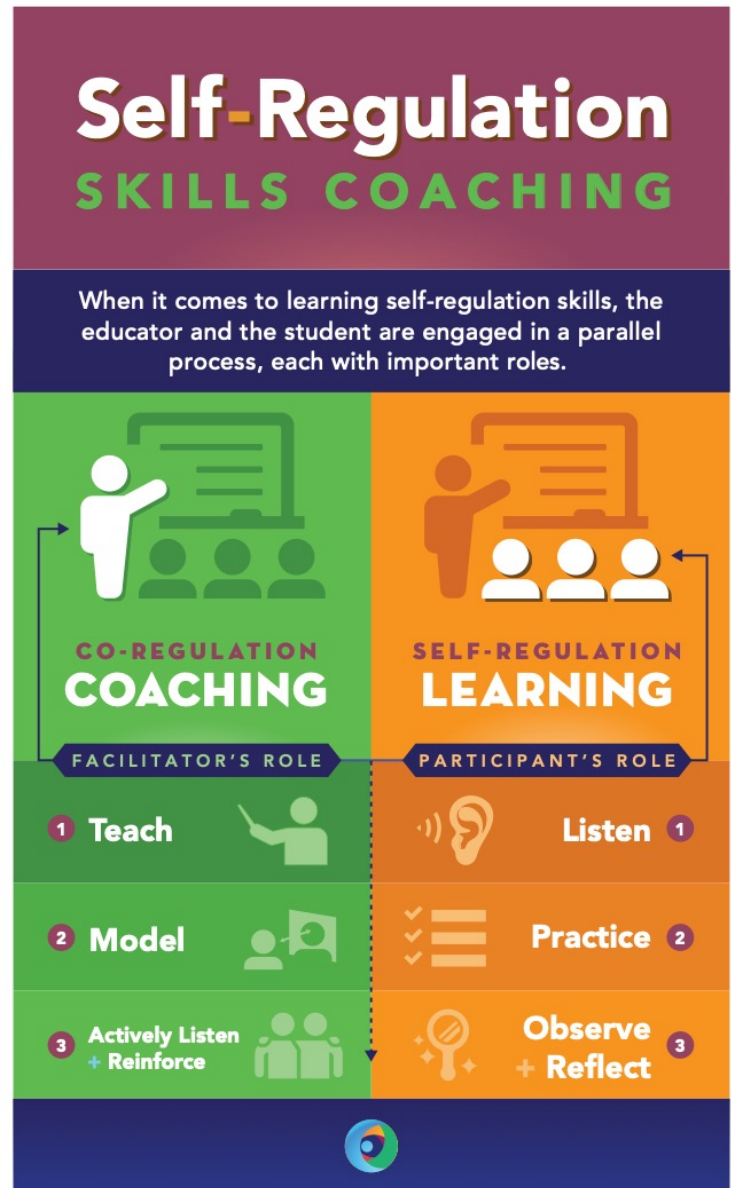
Co-regulation: Skills coaching

What does it mean to coach self-regulation skills?

The steps of self-regulation skills coaching are depicted in **Figure 4**. This image lists the self-regulation skills coaching steps involved in the facilitator's role (green) and the participant's role (orange). Although facilitators and participants engage in a parallel process, the primary responsibility is on the facilitators to ensure that both they and the participants have the opportunity for each step of the process when learning a skill.

First, the facilitator must teach a skill, such as communication, problem-solving, pausing to breathe or think before acting, or demonstrating commitment or acceptance (**See Figures 1 and 3 for types of skills and strategies that can be coached**). Next, the skill must be modeled so participants can envision its use in real-world settings. While facilitators implement these two steps, participants engage in a parallel process of learning the skill by listening to the instruction and then practicing the skill in real-time. Finally, facilitators can provide an opportunity to debrief the coaching experience that includes actively listening to participants as they observe and reflect on using the skill, and providing reinforcement for ongoing practice, reflection, and refinement.

FIGURE 4
SELF-REGULATION SKILLS COACHING INFOGRAPHIC





Lessons learned from the SARHM Project

The SARHM process provided an opportunity to develop co-regulation strategies with frontline staff at two sites and test on a small scale how programs received and integrated a co-regulation framework. HMRE staff reported that the information and training gave them new clarity about how to serve their participants' needs and how to deliver their programs. Here are a few lessons learned from the SARHM Project.

- **Integrating co-regulation strategies into HMRE programming for youth is feasible and shows promise for supporting implementation and youth engagement.**

As with most new program ideas, facilitators said they initially viewed the strategies as more work and feared they lacked time to use the strategies or that strategies might encroach on time needed to deliver the HMRE curriculum. As facilitators tested and were coached on the strategies, over time their comfort increased and they became more familiar with the strategies' purpose. Youth were more responsive to the strategies as facilitators reported more confidence using them. Integrating co-regulation strategies took time, intention, and ongoing support. Over time, the process of coaching yielded deeper learning and insights about how to use the strategies. According to facilitators, the co-regulation strategies showed promise for increasing youth engagement in the HMRE lessons during the group sessions.

- **It is important to infuse co-regulation and self-regulation principles at all levels of the program, in the workplace, in staff-supervisor relationships, and in interactions with participants.**

In SARHM, using co-regulation to shape project team interactions with program staff helped program staff learn how to apply the concepts to their work with youth. Facilitators were receptive to trying workplace self-regulation strategies and described greater learning from personal application of the approach as well as improvements in workplace relationships and morale. Over time, piloting the strategies facilitated a change in mindset that allowed program staff began to see the role they played in youths' capacity to self-regulate.



- **When researchers and practitioners work together, adding co-regulation to current programming is practical and sustainable.**

Program staffs' understanding of their context and the youth they served was critical for tailoring co-regulation strategies to staff and youth needs. Partnering researchers well-versed in the literature, theory, and process of co-regulation with staff well-versed in their program context facilitated more effective strategy development and promoted longer-term integration of co-regulation into practice. Staff had high investment in the process and outcome. Although the project has ended, staff continue to use a co-regulation framework in their service delivery approach.

Summary

Adolescence is a critical time for youth to develop the self-regulation skills that are linked to lifelong well-being. Adults play a vital role in supporting and fostering that development. **HMRE program staff are well positioned to influence self-regulation development through co-regulation in workshops or one-on-one meetings with youth.** Results from the SARHM project speak to the promise of integrating co-regulation strategies and measures in HMRE programs, as well as the impact of a collaborative design and implementation process for building program capacity around co-regulation knowledge and facilitation skill. Regardless of the curriculum used, and without changing content or reducing fidelity, SARHM demonstrated that HMRE staff can expand their co-regulation capacity by using simple strategies linked to each type of co-regulation support. The SARHM results suggest that building staff capacity for co-regulation is a promising approach to improve youth self-regulation, program implementation, and outcomes for HMRE programs. Focusing on self-regulation development and co-regulation may be a critical factor for HMRE programs in promoting healthy relationships for youth and for the adults who serve them.



Steps for Applying the Co-Regulation Model to Your Program



Below, we propose three steps to make co-regulation a part of your practice and inform your program delivery approach. The Co-Regulation in Practice Series offers additional information about self-regulation and co-regulation and serves as a “how to” guide for using selected strategies in your program (Frei et al, 2021).

1. Learn about self-regulation and co-regulation by exploring your own experience and the resources OPRE provides.

NOTICE what helps or hinders your own self-regulation.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What do you do in the moment when you start to feel very angry with someone?
- What thoughts come to mind when things don't go your way? Do the thoughts make things better or worse?
- How do you calm down when you feel stressed or overwhelmed?
- Do you notice yourself wishing you'd acted differently or regretting something you said?
- What do you do to stay focused on your overarching priorities when something in the short-term gets in the way?

REVIEW two important practice briefs and one report for a more in-depth explanation of self-regulation by developmental age and how to support it through co-regulation:

- [*Promoting Self-Regulation in Adolescents and Young Adults*](#)
- [*Co-Regulation from Birth through Young Adulthood*](#)
- [*Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: Foundations for Understanding Self-Regulation from an Applied Developmental Perspective*](#)



2. Engage staff to explore self-regulation, why it matters, and how to support it through co-regulation. Provide training and ongoing professional development.

HOLD a staff meeting to explore the constructs of self-regulation and co-regulation. Practitioner resources to guide your discussion are available on [OPRE's website](#).

ASK staff targeted questions about [relationships](#) in the meeting.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What are we consistently doing to help participants feel known and welcome?
- How do we convey warmth?
- How can participants experience us as responsive?
- How do we practice these qualities with each other in our workplace?

EXPLORE the program [environment](#).

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- Can participants feel safe to be themselves in this environment?
- Can they focus on learning, or are there distractions?
- What can I change about the environment to make it feel more inclusive and promote learning and reflection?

ENCOURAGE staff to tune into their senses (sight, sound, smell, etc.). Ask these same questions about how staff feel in the workshop environment and in their workplace.

EXPLORE how systematically your program staff coach participants to use [skills](#).

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- Do participants have the opportunity to learn and then practice skills in real time?
- Are we discussing and reflecting on how the skills are going?
- With your staff, brainstorm observable or measurable actions that could enhance relationships, the environment, and skills coaching between staff and participants, or among staff in the workplace. Review the co-regulation strategies shown in the table below. Are any of these strategies relevant for your program? See SARHM's *Co-Regulation in Practice Series* for a guide to implementing selected strategies (Frei et al., 2021).



3. Select a few strategies to test in your workshops and workplace.

TRY a new strategy on a small scale and gather feedback. Doing so allows you to troubleshoot the strategy, tailor it to your program, and improve its implementation with less risk.³

DECIDE which of the opportunities your team discussed in Step 2 are the first priorities for your program to address. For example, perhaps your team noted a lot of cross talk and distractions between participants during some curriculum topics, or that facilitators are often sitting in the front of the room and not interacting with participants as often as they could, or that more opportunity is needed for real-time skills practice.

CONSIDER selecting a few strategies from your brainstormed list or from the tables below and adapting them to your setting. Once you've picked a strategy that will address the problem, create a concrete and detailed list of action steps that staff need to take to implement the strategy and what you hope each step will achieve.

IDENTIFY a small set of staff who will test the strategy for a short period of time (if you have a small staff, it could be everybody). In your plan, include enough time for staff to get comfortable using the strategy and collect enough feedback to make an informed assessment of how the strategy worked. You likely will want to try the strategy for at least four weeks. Build in time to process the feedback and reflect on what changes you'd like to make.

OBSERVE the implementation and notice what is or is not working well. Note any observable shifts in staff and youth. Ask staff to report their experience and, after a period of testing the strategies, consider making any changes that seem needed to improve the strategy.

³The SARHM project adapted a process called Learn, Innovate, Improve, developed by ACF and Mathematica, to test and refine strategies. More information on Learn, Innovate, Improve can be found in this brief: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/learn-innovate-improve-li2-enhancing-programs-and-improving-lives>.



CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- How will you check on adherence to the steps of the strategy (and their intended goals)?
- How will staff and observers provide feedback about what is or is not working?
- How frequently will facilitators report their experiences? What questions do you have about the strategy that you want to answer?
- How can you get feedback from participants?

TRY the revised strategy with another small, short pilot. Keep communication open and bidirectional between staff and supervisors.

Being intentional to integrate co-regulation can enhance staff satisfaction as well as participant engagement, retention, and learning.



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<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>

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Additional SARHM Resources for Practitioners

The SARHM project resulted in information, resources, and guidance for the HMRE field, including:

- **Co-Regulation in Practice Series:** A series of practical, co-regulation focused strategies for HMRE facilitators and staff to use in their practice (Frei et al., 2021).
- **Observation Measures Brief:** Information about a measure developed to assess co-regulation in HMRE programs using observation (Alamillo et al., 2021).
- **SARHM Final Report:** Lessons to inform the field about applying co-regulation theory to practice, developing and refining strategies, recommended next steps, and areas for future research (Baumgartner et al., 2020).



Foster Families Guide: How To Support Older Youth With Foster Care Experience Through Co-Regulation

What is Co-Regulation?

Think about a time when you:

- Connected with a young person to help them feel heard, safe, and empowered to achieve their goals and solve their problems.
- Helped a young person understand and accept their feelings, gain perspective, persist through challenges, think before reacting in order to make good decisions, and identify their hopes and dreams.
- Supported a young person in staying connected to families and communities, being accountable to others, finding resources, asking for help, and creating healthy boundaries, routines, and environments.

This support is called [co-regulation](#).

Co-regulation is when caring adults nurture positive youth development by enacting three key types of support:

Intentional and Developmentally-Informed Day-to-Day Interactions

- promote self-regulation skills through reminding, modeling positive feedback, and facilitating self-reflection

Caring, Consistent, Responsive Relationships

- address youth's needs in the moment,
- validate their experiences,
- express interest and respect, and
- demonstrate commitment to them through challenges

Co-Creation of Supportive Environments

- connect with people and places that support youth's values, goals, strengths, and
- build routines for health, wellbeing, and self-sufficiency

**Every interaction
is an opportunity
for co-regulation.
— Maximize the
moment!**

Co-regulation is a process that doesn't happen overnight.

What does co-regulation look like?

- **Staying genuinely engaged** over time despite challenges that will arise.
- **Focusing on a young person's strengths** and resilience to help them build a positive self-narrative and self-identity.
- **Providing opportunities** to develop skills and competencies, balancing safety with opportunity for growth.
- **Being attuned** to the young person's needs in the moment and respecting their lived experiences and values.
- **Approaching a young person with compassion and flexibility**, understanding they may have a history of trauma.
- Helping the young person **self-reflect on experiences** to gain perspective and learn from successes and setbacks.
- **Collaboratively creating routines and environments** that support the young person's identity, goals, values, and well-being, and empower them to take more of the lead over time.
- Connecting the young person to **supportive peer networks and resources** like foster care alumni who can model pathways of success and affinity groups where their identities will be affirmed.
- **Interacting in intentional ways** by giving your full attention to a young person.
- **Promoting youth's skills and competencies** through modeling, reminding them to

use these skills, providing feedback in the moment, and encouraging self-reflection in a way that helps them learn and grow.

Why is co-regulation important for older adolescents in foster care?

- Youth who have been in foster care demonstrate many strengths and resilience, but may need additional co-regulation supports due to trauma experiences. Opportunities for co-regulation support can also be disrupted by separation from families and placement changes.
- Through co-regulation, caring adults (including additional professional support when needed) can help youth build the skills, connect with resources, and strengthen positive beliefs they need to maximize their adult capabilities.
- Co-regulation can also help buffer youth from other adversities they may encounter in the future when they are working towards things that are important to them.
- Just like helping someone to climb a steep mountain, youth need guides to make their way to the top, and a shelter when the weather is too dangerous to be out on their own.
- This doesn't mean carrying their load for them or giving them a ride to the top. Rather, caring adults can step in and help them find their way back to their path when they get lost or discouraged.



Based on what we learned from a [literature review and program scan](#), co-regulation can be used to support youth to:



Build healthy relationships and boundaries



Regulate their emotions and manage stress



Learn and grow from experience



Feel a greater sense of agency and empowerment in their lives



Promote a sense of belonging aligned with their social and cultural identity

How can you strengthen your own co-regulation capacity?

Caregiving can be emotionally and physically draining, and it is normal to lose your patience or your temper at times. Co-regulation can be hard when you feel tired or overwhelmed.

To build and strengthen your co-regulation capacity, try these tips:

- **Take time to care for yourself.** Prioritize time for activities you enjoy and find relaxing so you can recharge your own emotional battery.
- **Notice your emotional reactions** when you are feeling drained, irritable, or overwhelmed. Identify your own triggers in caring for a youth who has experienced trauma.
- **Be kind to yourself** if interactions don't go the way you want or if you lose your temper with youth. There is no such thing as a perfect parent!
- **Recognize opportunities for learning together** as you navigate difficult conversations and situations with youth. Acknowledging that you don't have all the answers can help youth accept their own mistakes.
- **Call on supports** before challenges become a crisis. Reach out to immediate and extended family, community and your child's caseworker. Asking for help is a strength you can model for youth.

Supporting older youth in foster care is an investment in the community that creates healthy, connected, and productive citizens.

Co-regulation not only supports youth, it also strengthens relationships between youth and their foster parents.

Co-Regulation Conversations

As illustrated here, caring adults can engage youth in supportive conversations in many different ways, depending on the situation and the young person's needs. Specific examples of conversations are shown on the next page.

Co-creating Supportive Environments

Engage in supportive conversation by asking open-ended questions such as:

- “Who can provide the resources, opportunities, and supports you want?”
- “Who can you connect with who has had a similar challenge and gotten through it?”
- “What situations and routines make it easier to reach your goals?”
- “What would motivate you and help you stay accountable to your plan?”

TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- Asking curious and intentional questions can support youth in building environments to foster success.
- Reaching out to others may be a difficult skill for youth with foster care experience, but one that can bring great rewards.

Day-to-Day Interactions

Engage in supportive conversation by asking open-ended questions such as:

- “What do you want to see happen?”
- “What are some possible negatives that you want to consider?”

TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- Avoid questions that imply criticism, like “Why did you do that?”
- Let them take the lead in solving their problems.
- Sometimes just being a supportive presence is enough to help youth manage tough emotions.
- Asking curious and intentional questions can help youth make good decisions in the moment.

Caring, Consistent, and Responsive Relationships

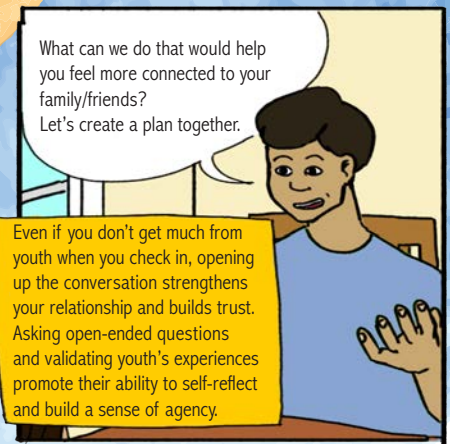
Engage in supportive conversation by asking open-ended questions such as:

- “What might be helpful from me?”
- “What do you need?”
- “What might support you in...?”

TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- Listen patiently and validate youth's feelings and experiences, even if you disagree with their actions.
- Sometimes support means respecting youth enough to be direct with them about your concerns.
- Youth with foster care experience may reject or test those they need the most.

Build relationships



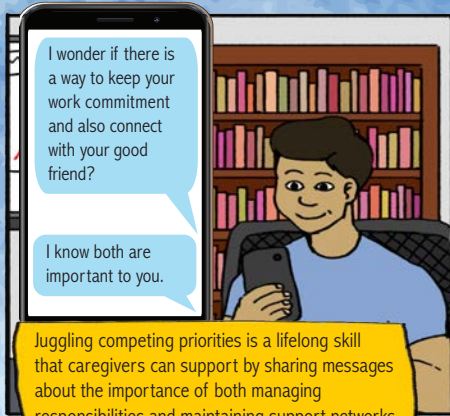
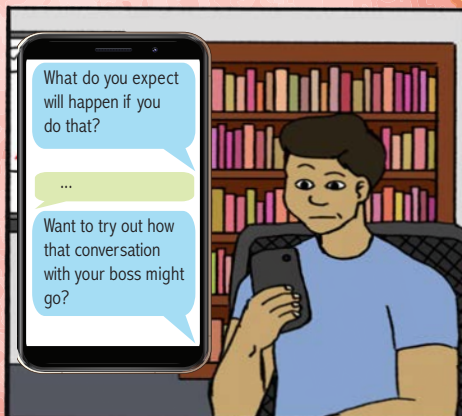
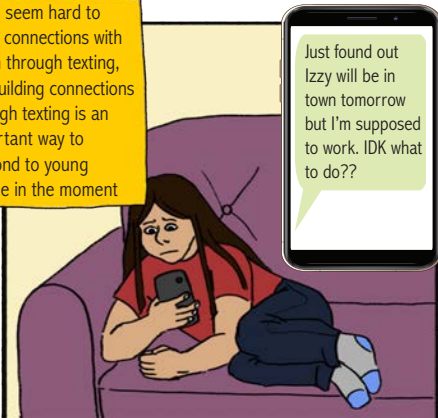
Day-to-Day Interactions

Environment

Support Youth Making a Tough Decision

Build relationships

It can seem hard to make connections with youth through texting, but building connections through texting is an important way to respond to young people in the moment



Day-to-Day Interactions

Environment

Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience

This tip sheet builds from a body of work supported by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that describes how self-regulation can be applied as a framework for promoting health and well-being for youth, with particular value for those who have experienced an accumulation of acute and chronic stressors. OPRE contracted with the Child Trends Team (Desiree Murray, Hannah Rackers, Karin Malm, and Kristin Sepulveda) for The Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience project. The purpose of this project is to provide an overview of the available research evidence and practice relevant to caring adults who work with and interface with these youth and young adults. The report from that project is the foundation for this tip sheet designed for caregivers of older youth in foster care. The strategies in this tip sheet are based on theory and evidence from the report, but have not yet been tested for effectiveness.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the following who all contributed substantially to the project: Capacity Building Center consultants (Amanda Cruce, Kristine Gunningham, and Arlene Jones), academic consultants (Junlei Li, Katie Rosanbalm, and Velma McBride Murry), illustrator (Ben Kubica), and instructional designer (Wendy Morgan).

Visit OPRE's website for a detailed [final report](#). Tip sheets for [Kinship Caregivers](#), [Child Welfare Professionals](#), and [Caring Adults](#) are also available. This tip sheet is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. This tip sheet and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.



Suggested Citation: Murray, Desiree W., Rackers, Hannah S., Sepulveda, Kristin, and Malm, Karin (2021). *Co-Regulation Tip Sheet for Foster Parents*, OPRE Report #2021-248, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Project Officers: Kelly Jedd McKenzie & Aleta Lynn Meyer, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; Catherine Health, Children's Bureau; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.

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Self-Regulation Snap Shot #2: A Focus on Preschool-Aged Children



Support of self-regulation is critical at each stage of development from birth through young adulthood.

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions.

Self-regulation develops through interaction with caregivers and the broader environment over an extended period from birth through young adulthood (and beyond).

Caregivers support self-regulation development by using three strategies in a process called “co-regulation.” Caregivers include parents, teachers, afterschool care providers, extended family members, and others.

Self-regulation includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills and processes that support children in coping with strong feelings, controlling impulses, learning, and getting along with others.

Self-regulation is important because it promotes wellbeing across the lifespan, including physical, emotional, social and economic health and educational achievement.

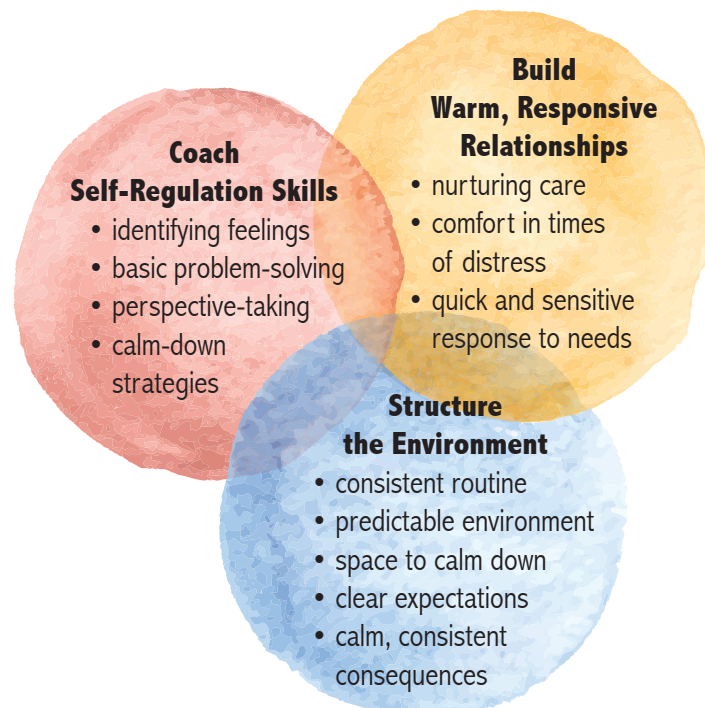
This snap shot summarizes key concepts about self-regulation development and intervention for preschool-aged children for practitioners and educators interested in promoting self-regulation for this age group. It is based on a series of four reports on Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress prepared for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). For more information, visit: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports>

Self-Regulation Skills Developing in Preschool-Aged Children:

- Recognizing a broader range of feelings in self and others
- Identifying solutions to simple problems
- With support, using strategies like deep breaths and self-talk to calm down
- Focusing attention for longer periods
- Persisting on difficult tasks for increased lengths of time
- Perspective-taking and early empathy



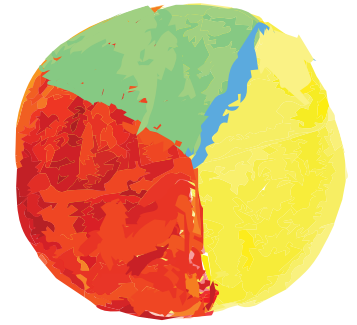
Self-regulation is influenced by stress and adversity in the environment as well as caregiving supports and children’s own biology, skills, and motivation.



Three components of co-regulation for preschool-aged children

Lessons Learned About Interventions to Promote Self-Regulation in Preschool-Aged Children

Across the lifespan, there are two intervention approaches that support development of self-regulation: skills instruction and co-regulation support. The combination of these approaches is believed to be most effective, regardless of the child's age. For preschool-aged children, existing interventions utilize these approaches as follows:



- 37% of studies focused on skills instruction alone;
- 27% focused on co-regulation alone;
- 32% combined both;
- 4% used other approaches

Based on a review of preventive interventions published between 1989 and 2013, 75 studies with comparison groups were found that targeted self-regulation development for preschool-aged children (ages 3-4 years), with the characteristics described here.

Strengths:

- Large number of studies with diverse samples
- Variety of outcomes, particularly direct assessment of child skills
- Most are implemented universally in preschool classrooms

Limitations:

- Programs are often lengthy
- Parent and teacher interventions are under-utilized

Conclusions:

- Broad positive impact seen across many domains
- Substantial effects for parents and teachers suggest benefit for expanding focus on co-regulation involvement of parents and teachers

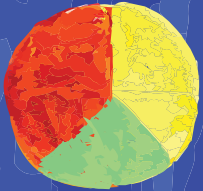
Key considerations for promoting self-regulation in preschool-aged children:

- Deliver self-regulation skills instruction universally in preschool classrooms
- Train preschool staff in co-regulation skills
- Identify ways to support school and program staff's own self-regulation capacity
- Share self-regulation information, ideas, and classroom approaches with parents/caregivers to support their co-regulation and promote consistency across environments

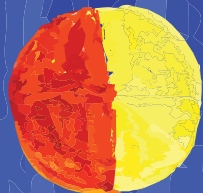
Outcome Assessed	# Findings	Average Effect Size*	% with Positive Effects*
Child Outcomes: Core Self-Regulation			
Cognitive	40	Small to Medium	78%
Emotional	30	Small to Medium	83%
Behavioral	84	Small to Medium	67%
Stress	17	Small	53%
Motivation/ Initiative	6	Small to Medium	67%
Child Outcomes: Other Functional Domains			
Language/Learning	31	Small to Medium	77%
Interpersonal	53	Small	66%
Mental Health	37	Small	65%
Parent Outcomes			
Parent Co-regulation	21	Medium	95%
Parenting Skills	37	Medium	95%
Parenting Attitudes	11	Medium	91%
Parent Mental Health	6	Small to Medium	67%
Teacher Outcomes			
Teacher Co-regulation	2	Small to Medium	50%
Classroom Climate	15	Medium to Large	87%

*Reported only if findings are based on at least two studies

60% of the children lived in adversity or were at-risk



More than half of the children were minority (34% African-American, 25% Hispanic)



More than half of the interventions were implemented in schools

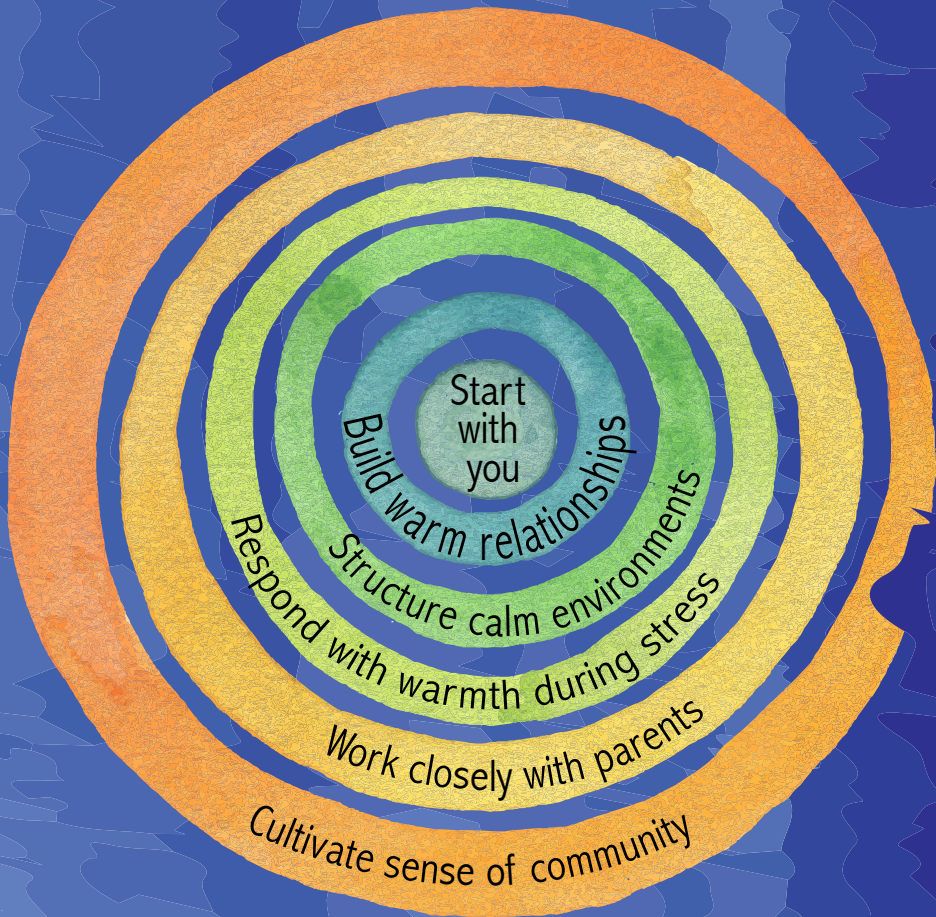
The majority of studies targeted children (79%); 56% targeted parents; 23% targeted teachers

Project Officer: Aleta Meyer, Ph.D. OPRE

Suggested Citation: Rosanbalm, K. and Murray, D.W. (2017). Self-Regulation Snap Shot #2: A Focus on Preschool-Aged Children. OPRE Report #2018-11, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This brief was funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Contract Number HHSP23320095642WC/HHSP23337035T.

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Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation in Young Children



Tips for Practitioners Working with Infants in Classroom Settings



Infants (birth to 1 year old)

The first year of life is a critical time for infants to begin developing secure attachments with their parents and caregivers (secure attachment is when children know they can depend on adults to respond sensitively to their needs). This helps babies learn that their world is a safe place and it is an important foundation for self-regulation development. When babies transition to childcare outside of the home, they need to form relationships with other caregivers and learn through experience that their needs will be met. Infants are sensitive to the emotions of adults and rely on caregivers to provide a calm and soothing presence, particularly during times of transition or distress. Infants can utilize simple self-regulation skills such as self-soothing or turning their attention away from upsetting situations, usually toward their caregiver, to seek comfort. This document provides tips to help caregivers use co-regulation to support early development of self-regulation skills in infants. Program administrators may wish to view practice briefs that describe [self-regulation development in early childhood](#) and [co-regulation from birth to young adulthood](#) in more detail.

In addition, this [snapshot](#) summarizes key self-regulation concepts and interventions, and may be helpful for practitioners working with infants.

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions. The development of self-regulation begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

6 Co-regulation Tips for Working with Infants



1 Start with you. We all feel stressed at times, and caregiving can be demanding. Practice self-care and effective stress management to enhance your own well-being and resilience in the classroom.

2 Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each baby. Optimal self-regulation development in children occurs in the context of positive relationships. Develop a warm relationship with every child to create a strong and essential foundation for your co-regulation practices.

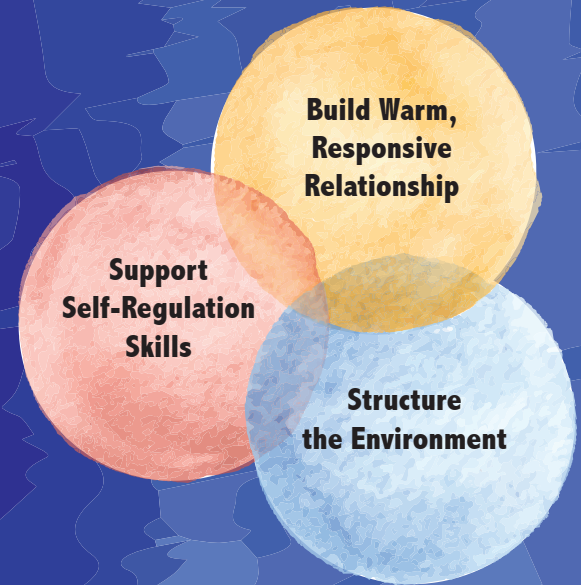
3 Create calm and structured childcare environments. Infants will experience moments of distress in any normal day. You can prevent and buffer some of this by creating calm, soothing, and homelike environments.

4 Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments. Infants need the most co-regulation support when they are upset and unable to regulate their own emotions. You can promote self-regulation development by being warm and responsive and providing physical comfort to help babies calm down.

5 Work closely with parents. Self-regulation development is influenced by home and childcare environments. Engage with parents to learn about their efforts at home and to support self-regulation development across settings.

6 Cultivate a sense of community. Social environments can shape individual behaviors and relationships. Facilitate early social engagement and allow babies the opportunity to feel connected with each other to support healthy social and emotional development and to lay groundwork for future peer relationships.

Co-regulation is the warm, responsive interactions and support, structure, coaching and modeling provided by caregivers to foster self-regulation development in children.



***Self-regulation
development***

***begins at birth
and continues into
young adulthood and beyond.***

***Co-regulation
from caregivers***

***is important for
optimal self-regulation
development.***

***Caregivers can use the tips provided
within this document to support
the specific self-regulation skills
developing at each age.***

Infants

In infancy, basic self-regulation skills allow a baby find comfort when they feel overwhelmed or upset. For example, infants can:

- self-soothe by sucking on their fingers or a pacifier
- avert their gaze and attention away from upsetting situations and toward sources of comfort

Each of the 6 tips for co-regulation is detailed in the pages that follow.

1

Start with you.

Learn to recognize and manage your own stresses. See also these [Taking Care of Ourselves](#) guides for suggestions.

Take advantage of available support services to understand how your own feelings, experiences, and well-being influence your interactions with infants and their families.

Add mind-body activities to your daily routines. Simple activities, such as mindful breathing or yoga, can have big benefits.

Practice keeping your mind in the present moment when caring for infants to help yourself and the baby feel at ease. Whether feeding, changing a diaper, or consoling a crying baby, keep your thoughts focused on the baby. You can also count your own breaths or movements and notice your sensations to help your mind stay present and calm.

2

Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each baby.

Use child-centered caregiving practices that build connections.

Respond warmly to a baby's cues with eye contact, reassuring words, or with physical affection to support development of social and emotional skills and build strong relationships.

Use play to strengthen your relationship with the infants.

To learn more about the benefits of responding sensitively and consistently to an infant's cues and gestures, see this [overview of the Serve and Return concept](#).

Create calm and structured childcare environments.

Set up the childcare room in ways that reduce frustration or overstimulation and that provide a “home away from home” feeling. For example, separate quiet and noisy areas and use natural light and cozy furniture and décor.

Create predictable schedules and routines to give the babies a sense of calm and security.

Anticipate babies’ physical and emotional needs and attend to them before the infant gets frustrated.

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments.

When a baby becomes upset, respond quickly with reassuring words and physical affection.

Remove the baby from stressful situations to a quiet area and continue to give reassurance and comfort until he or she is calm.

Remember to treat yourself with kindness and empathy during stressful moments. Being aware of any unpleasant feelings that these moments bring about will make it easier to respond with empathy toward yourself and toward the baby.



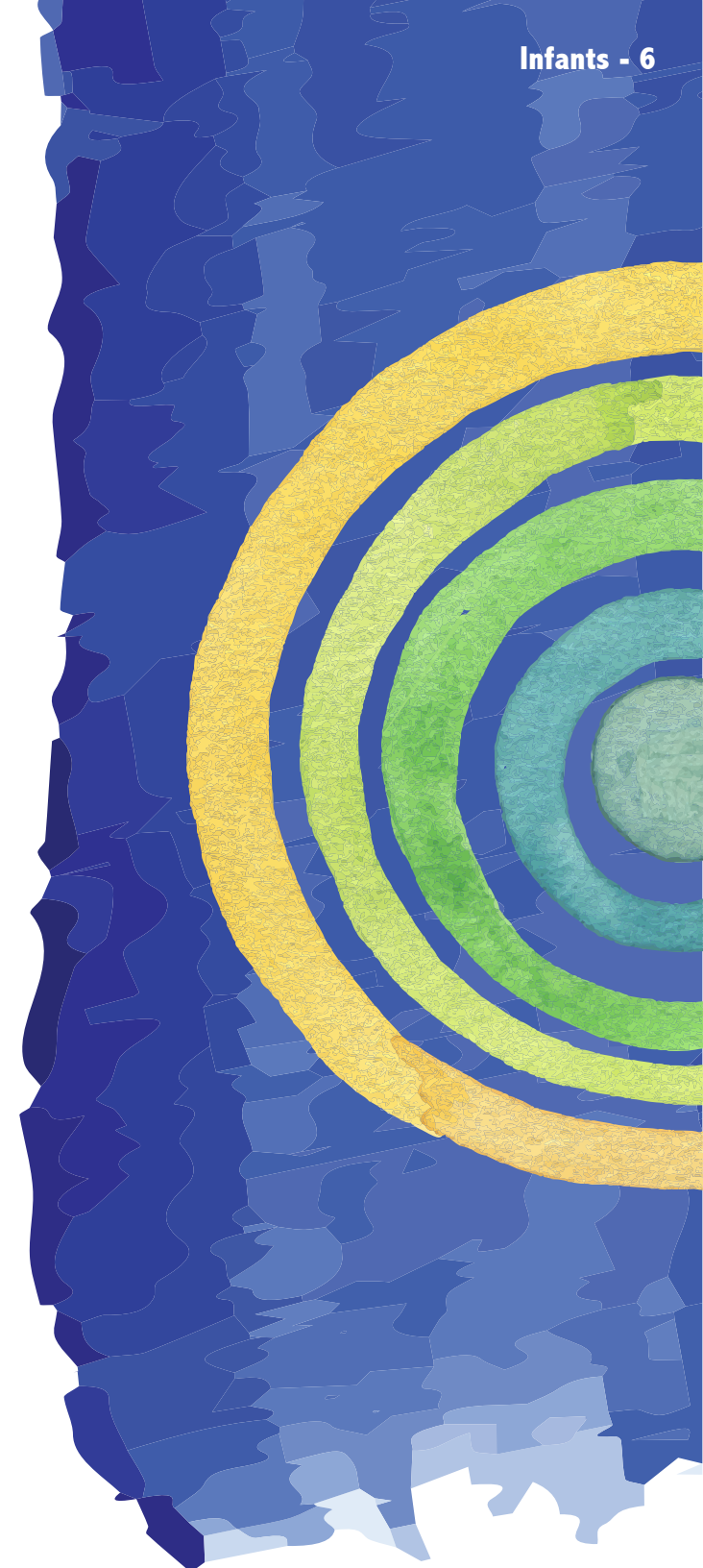


Work closely with parents.

Talk with parents about the importance of warm, responsive parenting for helping their infant regulate emotions and behaviors. Ask parents about strategies and routines that work at home, and offer ideas and explain the approaches you use with their baby.

Create regular opportunities for parents and teachers to share experiences and perspectives. Ongoing dialogue with parents around common goals for the child will help you understand parents' perspectives so you can work together for the infant's benefit.

Children and families living in stressful conditions may need extra support from home visiting or mental health services. Stay up-to-date on resources that are available to help you support them. Links to a few resources are provided at the end of this document.



Cultivate a sense of community.

Create a caring childcare environment that reinforces a strong sense of community. Sing songs together or create special rituals that help the babies feel connected with each other and the childcare environment.

Show warmth and kindness toward each infant to send a positive caregiving message to other babies and adults in the room. For example, talk about how and why you might respond to a crying baby: “Baby Jane is crying. Maybe she is hungry or has a wet diaper. I am going to check and see if I can help her feel better.”

Create opportunities to allow babies to see and hear each other to support their future interaction and play. Put them near each other where they can make eye contact, babble back and forth, and share engagement with the same objects.

Model respect and compassion in your relationships with other adults so infants can sense the positive emotions and can see examples of caring relationships.

6



Additional web-based resources

The following websites contain additional tools to support self-regulation development in children, including many of the links embedded within the tips above. These links are intended to provide further examples, and represent a small selection of the many resources that are available to practitioners.

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#)

[Maryland Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(SEFEL\)](#)

[National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)

[Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)

[Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts: Serve and Return](#)

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#)

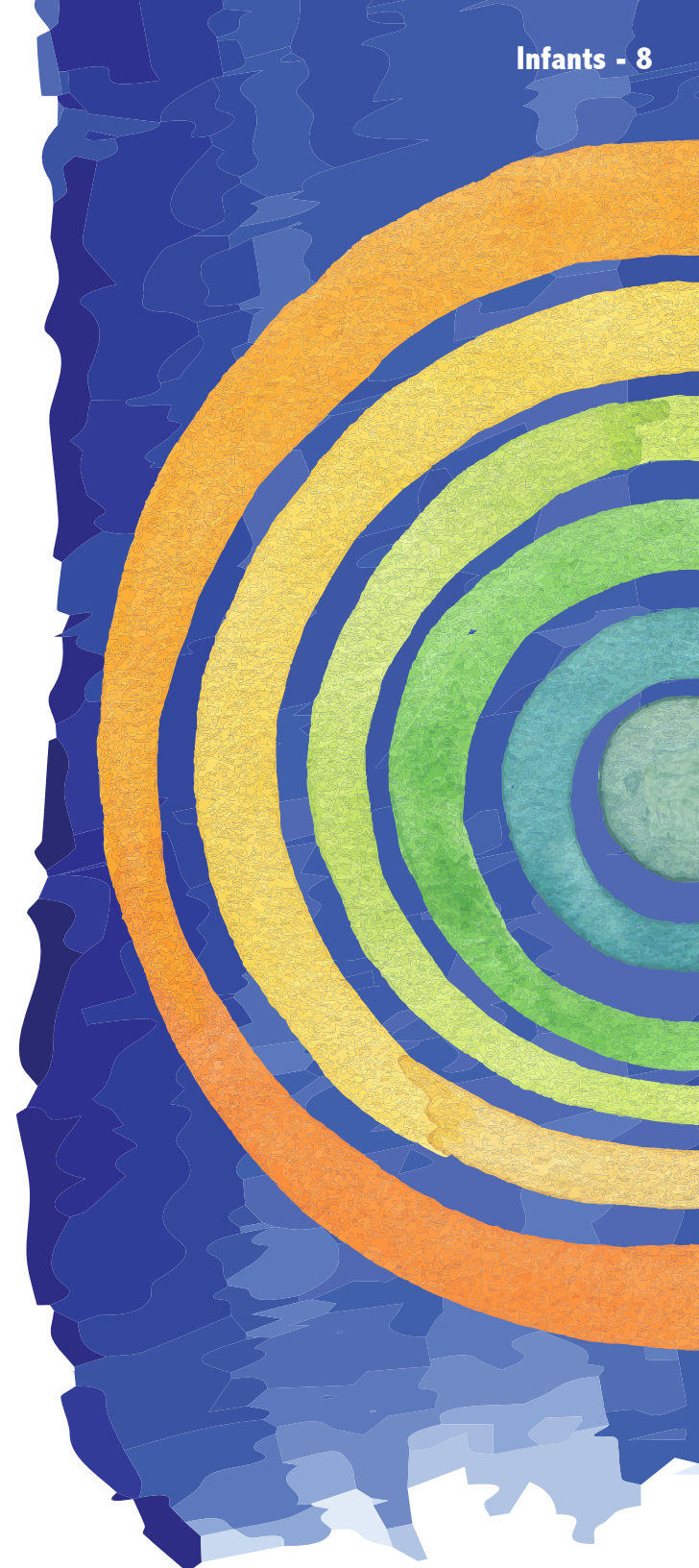
[Integrated Stage-Based Framework for Implementation of Early Childhood Programs and Systems](#)

OPRE Brief: 2019-27

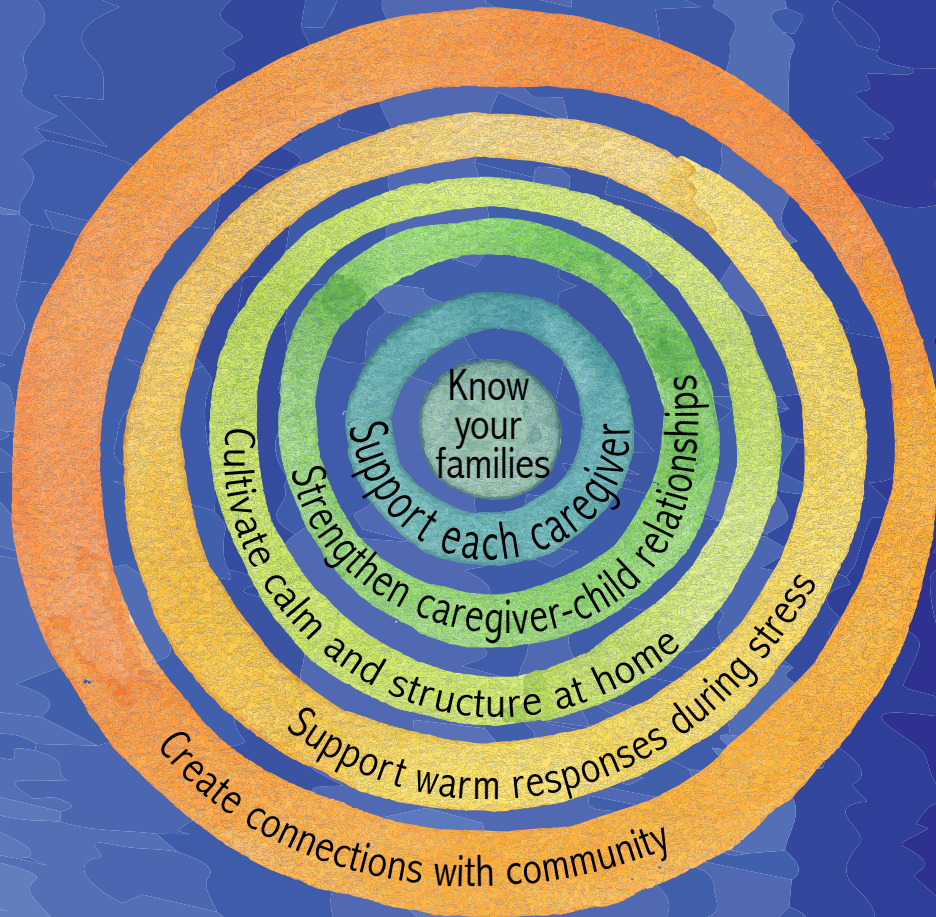
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This is one of four early childhood practitioner tip sheets. Much of the content is based on the reports and briefs in the [Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports) (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports>) prepared for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) by the Duke Center for Family Policy and the UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.



Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation in Young Children



Tips for Practitioners Working with Families in Home Settings



Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers (birth-5 years old)

The home environment, including a child's relationship with their parents and primary caregivers, is the biggest influence on a child's ability to develop self-regulation skills. Home visiting professionals have a unique opportunity to help both the child and parent or caregiver develop self-regulation skills and to strengthen their relationship. Some families in home visiting programs may be experiencing economic strain and other adversity and may need extra help to manage stress. Home visitors may also need to work with mental health services or other support programs to assist parents and caregivers with specific challenges, such as coping with depression or managing a child's challenging behaviors. This document provides tips to help home visitors empower caregivers with skills and tools to provide co-regulation support for their child. The term 'caregiver' is used throughout the tip sheet to include parents and/or any adult with a primary caregiving role in the child's life. Program administrators may also wish to view practice briefs that describe [self-regulation development in early childhood](#) and [co-regulation from birth to young adulthood](#) in more detail.

In addition, snapshots that summarize key self-regulation concepts and interventions in [infants and toddlers](#) and in [preschoolers](#) may be helpful for home visiting practitioners.

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions. The development of self-regulation begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

6 Co-regulation Tips for Home Visitors Working with Families with Small Children

1 Establish a strong relationship with each family. Engaging with caregivers and earning their trust will help you have a positive influence on the family and work with them in ways that builds upon their unique strengths.

2 Help caregivers build their own self-regulation capacity. Caregivers may need to strengthen their own self-regulation skills to better support the children.

3 Strengthen and support the caregiver-child relationship. Secure relationships with parents and caregivers are the bedrock of self-regulation development in children.

4 Work with caregivers to cultivate calm and structured home environments that support child development. Positive routines and a warm home climate can help prevent and buffer stressful experiences.

5 Help caregivers learn how to respond with both warmth and structure during stressful moments. Being warm and responsive when a child is upset and unable to regulate their own emotions is a central feature of co-regulation by caregivers. Caregivers can also help children learn important self-regulation skills that will help them during times of stress.

6 Provide opportunities for families to build social support connections. The caregivers and children benefit from social support networks and positive relationships with peers in their community.

Co-regulation is the warm, responsive interactions and support, structure, coaching and modeling provided by caregivers to foster self-regulation development in children.

**Support
Self-Regulation
Skills**

**Build Warm,
Responsive
Relationship**

**Structure
the Environment**

Home visiting work can be stressful. Remember to start with you.

Tend to your own physical and emotional health to enhance your well-being and minimize the effects of stress.

You can model and coach self-care and stress-management practices for the caregivers and children.

- Regular exercise, adequate sleep, and nutritious eating habits can boost your energy and resilience.
- Spend quality time with family and friends, and talk to them about the demands and the joys of your work so they can provide emotional support.
- Learn to recognize and manage your own stresses. When you feel overwhelmed, have compassion toward yourself and use calming techniques such as deep breathing. Simple mind-body activities, such as yoga, [relaxation](#), and [mindfulness](#) practices can boost health and relieve stress.

Home visitors can use the tips provided within this document to help caregivers support the specific self-regulation skills their child is developing.

From basic self-soothing in infants to increasing ability among preschoolers to self-adjust behavior, each age range is marked by development of unique self-regulation skills.

In infancy, basic self-regulation skills allow a baby find comfort when they feel overwhelmed or upset. Infants can self-soothe by sucking on their fingers or a pacifier, and avert their gaze and attention away from upsetting situations and toward sources of comfort.

Toddlers can use self-regulation skills to begin to manage their behaviors. This may include the ability to focus and wait for brief periods, adjust behavior to reach goals, and learn to use simple words to tell others how they feel and to ask adults for help.

Preschoolers have a growing range of self-regulation skills that can be expanded with coaching and instruction from adults. Preschoolers can begin to understand perspectives of others, control impulses more often, follow rules and work toward goals, and learn to use language and actions to calm down and solve simple problems.

Even as self-regulation skills continue to grow, it is important to remember that all young children need external structure and support to control their impulses and manage strong emotions.

Each of the 6 tips for co-regulation is detailed in the pages that follow.

Self-regulation development begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

Co-regulation from caregivers is important for optimal self-regulation development.

1

Establish a strong relationship with each family.

Take time to understand the family's culture and the caregivers' goals for the child and incorporate their values and preferences into your work with them.

Listen openly to the caregivers' concerns, and work collaboratively to address them. Start with the caregivers' needs and ideas, and together identify approaches to address their concerns.

Empower caregivers and help build their sense of competence by identifying their strengths, recognizing their efforts, and providing encouragement.

Use [Family Engagement tools](#) and [Reflective Strategies](#) to help you build strong relationships with each of your families.

2

Help caregivers build their own self-regulation capacity.

Help caregivers understand that strengthening their own self-regulation skills will have positive benefits on their children's self-regulation development. Share with them the [benefits of mindfulness practices](#) for their own well-being as well as the caregiver-child relationship.

Work with caregivers to identify sources of stress and ways to lessen the impact of stress on themselves and their children as much as possible. Talk through life's day-to-day challenges and help them come up with solutions to reduce the stressors when possible. Connect them with local services and supports as needed.

Coach caregivers on how to identify and manage their own emotions during stressful situations. For example, they might take their own "time out" to calm down or talk with a friend about solutions before acting to address a problem. This will enable them to respond to their children in a more positive and thoughtful way and will model self-regulation strategies.

Pay attention to the possibility of underlying mental health issues, such as depression or substance misuse, which are common responses to ongoing stress and adversity. Provide emotional support for the caregivers, and connect them with [mental health resources](#) and local services when needed.

Address possible risk factors and build protective factors for child maltreatment or neglect. Understand the various [factors that may increase the chances for child abuse and neglect, and promote protective factors](#). If you have specific concerns, use available tools to [prevent](#) or [respond](#) if necessary.

Support and strengthen the caregiver-child relationship.

Help caregivers understand that having a [warm and responsive relationship](#) with their child is the most important part of the child's environment that shapes brain development, and is the cornerstone of effective co-regulation.

Help caregivers appreciate their child's unique personality, and assist them in identifying, understanding, and responding to their child's cues and behaviors. This [Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(SEFEL\) guide](#) can help caregivers learn what to expect and how to understand behaviors in children from birth to age 2. This [temperament assessment tool](#) may help you and the caregiver support their child's unique traits.

Guide caregivers in providing warm and responsive care using daily caregiving routines, such as feeding, diapering, and bathing. Predictable and sensitive care will help establish trust and a positive connection between the caregiver and child.

Engage caregivers in playful interactions with their children using simple materials in the home and during normal daily routines. Model warm and responsive play when you interact with their child.



4

Help caregivers cultivate calm and structured home environments.

Help parents and caregivers understand how a child's environment and experiences can influence behavior. When children experience more stress than they can handle, this may lead to "acting out" behaviors, signaling that they feel overwhelmed and need support. Parents and caregivers can prevent some problem behaviors by buffering key stressors through warm, responsive relationships and consistent, positive routines and structure.

Work with caregivers to establish family rituals and routines that facilitate positive interactions with the child. Help the caregivers understand how routines and structure help children feel calm and safe and can provide a sense of security during stressful moments.

Support basic parenting skills development to enhance the safety and wellbeing of the child and to boost the caregivers' self-confidence. See this [example 7-step format](#) for coaching caregivers in a way that is supportive and non-critical

Coach the caregivers in positive, responsive parenting. Encourage and reinforce caregivers' sensitivity and responsiveness to their child's behavior, and model positive behavior management in your interactions with the child.

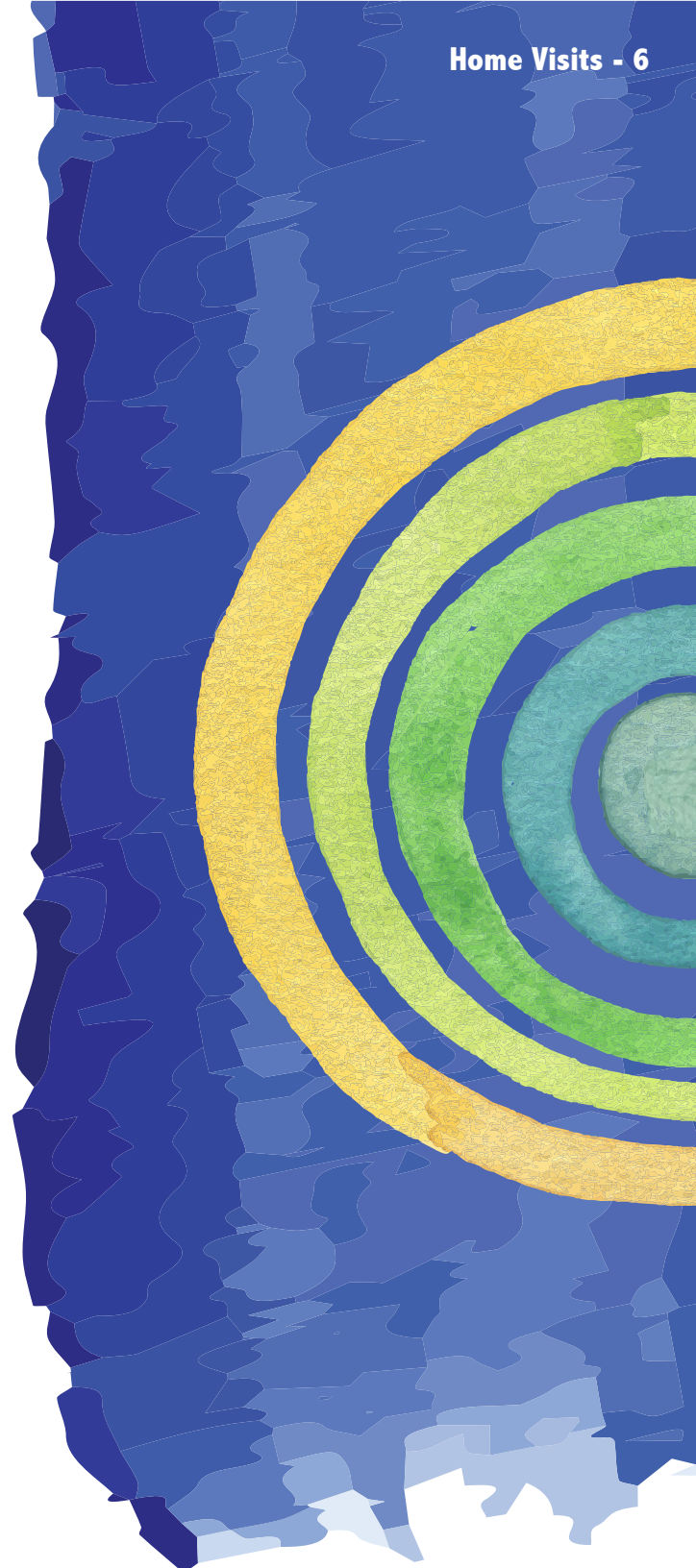
5

Help caregivers learn how to respond with both warmth and structure during stressful moments.

Help caregivers practice positive discipline and maintain a warm relationship while setting limits. For children of all ages, caregivers should remain calm during stressful moments and while enforcing rules. For children who are preschool-aged and older, brief and logical consequences will help encourage positive behavior, especially when this is done in the context of a positive relationship with the child. Providing consistent structure and calmness will help children continuously improve their self-regulation abilities.

Help caregivers work with their children during calm moments to develop self-regulation skills that they can use when they experience upsetting situations. For example, the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (SEFEL) initiative provides [activities](#), [scripted stories](#) and a [caregiver's guide](#) that can help a child learn positive behaviors and how to react calmly when upset.

Provide tools caregivers can use to address challenging behaviors in preschool-aged children. These [teaching tools](#) and [behavior management tools](#) provide ready-to-use ideas and materials to help young children with challenging behavior.



Support positive family relationships and community connections.

Model respect and compassion in your relationships with the children, the caregivers, and with other adults. Help the caregivers understand that their relationships with other individuals provide an example that will influence how children learn to interact with others.

If there are multiple children in the family, help the caregivers identify strategies to support positive sibling relationships. For example, spending quality one-on-one time with each child for even 15 minutes a day can reduce sibling competition for attention. Caregivers can also mediate sibling conflicts to help the children understand each other's perspectives and learn social problem-solving skills.

Consider group sessions that bring together mothers, fathers, co-parents, or other caregivers to encourage families to connect as a community. Use these sessions to help all caregivers understand the importance of their relationships with the child and to share co-regulation approaches.

Take advantage of opportunities to support relationship-building with others in the community. Socializing with other families can strengthen relationships within and between families. For preschoolers, play groups or outings can support development of relationships with peers and other adults. Group activities can also help caregivers establish supportive relationships with other parents and caregivers.

Help caregivers talk to their preschool aged and older children about how to be a good friend to their peers. For one example, see the "I Can Be a Super Friend" story from [SEFEL's Scripted Stories for Social Situations](#).

6



Additional web-based resources

The following websites contain additional tools to support social and emotional and self-regulation development in young children, including many of the links embedded within the tips above. These links are intended to provide further examples and represent a small selection of the many resources that are available to practitioners.

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#)

[Maryland Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(SEFEL\)](#)

[National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)

[Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)

[Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts: Serve and Return, Building Adult Capabilities, Ready4Routines](#)

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#)

[Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems](#)

[Home Visitor's Handbook](#)

[Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)

[Integrated Stage-Based Framework for Implementation of Early Childhood Programs and Systems](#)

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