Co-Regulation: An Evidence-Based Approach to Building Self-Regulation in Early Childhood

Desiree W Murray, PhD, Kate Gallagher, PhD, and Katie Rosanbalm PhD

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Self-Regulation Development and Co-Regulation from Birth to Age 5

| **Developmental Stage** | **Characteristics of Self-Regulation** | **How Caregivers Can Provide**  **Co-Regulation** | **Interventions with Positive Effects** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Infancy (birth to age 1) | * Orient attention away from stressors * Engage caregivers as resources for comfort * Begin to self-soothe | * Interact in warm and responsive ways * Anticipate and respond quickly to child’s needs * Provide physical and emotional comfort when child is stressed * Modify environment to decrease demands and stress | Home visiting and parent-child interaction programs, such as   * ABC (attachment and Biobehavioral Catchup) * Child First * Family Foundations * PALS |
| Toddlerhood (1-2 years) | * Begin to select and shift attention (attentional control) * Adjust behavior to achieve simple goals * Delay gratification and inhibit responses for short periods when there is structure and support * Emotions are stronger than cognitive regulation * Feelings of attachment support prosocial goals | * Reassure and calm child when upset by removing child from situations or speaking calmly and giving affection * Model self-calming strategies * Teach rules and redirecting to regulate behavior | Home visiting and parent-child interaction programs, such as   * ABC (attachment and Biobehavioral Catchup) * Child First * Family Foundations * PALS |
| Preschool (3-5 years) | * Focused attention increase but is still brief * Begin to use rules, strategies, and planning to guide behavior appropriate to situation * Delay gratification and inhibit responses for longer periods * Perspective-taking and empathy support prosocial goals * Language begins to control emotional responses and actions * Tolerate some frustration and distress apart from caregiver (self-calming skills emerge) | * Model, prompt, and reinforce (for “coach”) self-calming strategies when child is upset * Instruct and coach use of words to express emotion and identify solutions to simple problems * Coach rule-following and task completion * Provide external consequences to support emerging self-regulation skills | Parenting programs and social-emotional curricula, such as:   * Incredible Years * Parent Corps * Chicago School Readiness Program * Head Start REDI * PATHS * Tools of the Mind |

Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos & Hamoudi. (2015). Foundations for understanding self-regulation from an applied developmental perspective. OPRE Report #2015-21. Administration for Children and Families.

Murray, D.W., Rosanbalm, K., and Christopoulos, C. (2016). Self-regulation and toxic stress Report 3: A comprehensive review of self-regulation interventions from birth through young adulthood and full appendix of programs studied and effect sizes for outcomes across domains. OPRE Report #2016-34. Administration for Children and Families.

**Fostering Self-Regulation Skills in the Classroom**

**Self-Regulation Coaching: providing intentional instruction and self-regulation skill support within the context of a warm, responsive relationship**

* Prompt use of self-regulation skills in specific situations (e.g. taking deep breaths or pausing when upset)
* Anticipate self-regulation demands (e.g. during transitions and less structured times) and reviewing rules and strategies for managing
* Role-play strategies to support child’s use of skills in the moment/situation
* Monitor the child while using skills and provide specific positive feedback on small steps and efforts
* Praise and reinforce the child/youth for success and teaching them to self-praise efforts
* Help the youth consider alternative solutions to problems when efforts are not successful

**Example Self-Regulation Coaching Statements**

* You keep trying even though that is a difficult math problem.
* You look frustrated, but I can see you trying a different plan.
* I can see you are upset, but you are keeping your body calm
* I know you want your turn now, but you are really waiting patiently.
* I bet you will figure out that problem. You just keep on trying!
* You are becoming so strong at staying calm
* I see that you all are taking turns, using friendly language, working together
* You are listening to your friend and accepting her suggestion
* It looks like you are being really helpful, compromising, apologizing, etc.

**Building a Classroom Community that Support Self-Regulation**

* Prompt students to compliment each other (try a compliment circle)
* Praise and/or provide incentives for teamwork, being a good friend, and group cooperative
* Prompt students to use social skills such as asking for a turn, joining in a group, sharing, etc.
* Communicate with parents and good friendship matches and specific social skills you are focusing on in your classroom
* Create a calm-down spot or cozy corner where students can go to be alone and calm down when they are upset