

Understanding Co-Regulation

Children learn to regulate by borrowing the calm of the adults around them.

WHAT IT MEANS

Co-regulation is the process by which a steady, responsive person helps another person return to a more settled state.

KEY IDEAS

- Self-regulation is learned, not automatic. Children build it gradually through many experiences with responsive adults.
- A calm, present adult acts like an external support while a child's own skills are still developing.
- Co-regulation continues across the lifespan. Adults steady one another in families, friendships and workplaces.
- Ruptures are normal. Returning to repair is part of how trust and regulation grow.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- Developmental researchers describe self-regulation as growing out of co-regulation: warm, responsive relationships, a structured environment, and coaching of skills (Murray et al., 2015).
- Back-and-forth 'serve and return' interactions between children and caregivers are linked to healthy brain development (Center on the Developing Child; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).
- Reducing unnecessary stress and noticing signs of overload can help children return to a calmer state (Shanker, 2016).

TRY THIS

- Notice and steady yourself first.
- Offer presence before problem-solving.
- Repair afterwards when things go wrong.

REFLECT

- What helps me steady myself when someone near me is upset?
- What does my body do when a child or loved one is overwhelmed?
- How do I usually reconnect after a hard moment?

This guide is educational and is not therapy, diagnosis or medical advice. If feelings or relationships feel unmanageable or unsafe, please reach out to a licensed professional. In a crisis in the U.S., call or text 988.

SOURCES

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (n.d.). Serve and return. developingchild.harvard.edu
Murray, D. W., Rosanbalm, K., Christopoulos, C., & Hamoudi, A. (2015). Self-regulation and toxic stress: Foundations for understanding self-regulation from an applied developmental perspective (OPRE Report #2015-21). U.S. Administration for Children and Families.
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Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. National Academies Press.

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