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

Desiree W. Murray, PhD. and Kate Gallagher, PhD.
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina-CH
Katie Rosanbalm, PhD., Center for Child and Family Policy, Duke University
AGENDA

• Overview of Self-Regulation
• Influences on Self-Regulation Development
• Understanding “Co-Regulation”
• Coaching Self-Regulation
What is Self-Regulation?
Self-Regulation IS...

The act of managing *cognition* and *emotion* to enable *goal-directed actions* such as:

- organizing behavior
- controlling impulses
- solving problems constructively

Self-Regulation INCLUDES:
- Willpower
- Emotion Regulation
- Executive Functioning
- Self-Control
- Effortful Control
- Self-Management
Self-Regulation in Young Children

Turn and Talk

• What does self-regulation look like during infancy, toddler-hood, preschool?
• What are some common situations where children have difficulty self-regulating?
What Skills do Young Children Need to Develop so they can Self-Regulate?
Self-Regulation in Children with Disabilities

Turn and Talk

• What can make self-regulation more challenging?
• What contributes to these challenges?
Why is Self-Regulation Important?

• Foundational for success in school
• Predicts wellbeing and positive long-term development
• Problems with behavior regulation
  Suspension and expulsion from child care centers
  • 8,000 preschoolers suspended every year
  • Disproportionately boys and Black children
  • About 20% are children with disabilities
  • Rates of expulsion 3x as high as for school-aged children
  • More than 10% of state-funded NC preschool teachers reported having expelled a child

Gilliam, 2005, DOE 2014
Connections to the DEC Recommended Practices

Interaction
• INT1. Practitioners promote the child’s social-emotional development by observing, interpreting, and responding contingently to the range of the child’s emotional expressions.
• INT2. Practitioners promote the child’s social development by encouraging the child to initiate or sustain positive interactions with other children and adults during routines and activities through modeling, teaching, feedback, or other types of guided support.
• INT5. Practitioners promote the child’s problem-solving behavior by observing interpreting, and scaffolding in response to the child’s growing level of autonomy and self-regulation.

Instruction
• INS4. Practitioners plan for and provide the level of support, accommodations, and adaptations needed for the child to access, participate, and learn within and across activities and routines.
• INS9. Practitioners use functional assessment and related prevention, promotion, and intervention strategies across environments to prevent and address challenging behavior.
• INS13. Practitioners use coaching or consultation strategies with primary caregivers or other adults to facilitate positive adult-child interactions and instruction

Division for Early Childhood. (2014).
What Influences Self-Regulation?
How Families Influence Self-Regulation (100+ studies)

• Parental warmth and sensitivity
• Harsh discipline and maltreatment
• Parents’ mental health
• Buffers the effect of stressors
How ECE Programs Influence Self-Regulation

• Positive Teacher-Child Relationship:
  - “Protects” from risks of poverty
  - Promotes academic achievement and social adjustment

• Classrooms with effective behavior management:
  - Less disruptive, aggressive, and inappropriate behavior
  - Children more focused on learning

• Classroom management programs work!
  - Increase teachers’ effectiveness and reduce stress

Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 1995; Silver et al., 2005; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2007, 2009
How Stress Influences Self-Regulation

**POSITIVE**
Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

**TOLERABLE**
Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

**TOXIC**
Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.

Traumatic Stress:
- ACEs and/or the accumulated burdens of poverty
- Increases vulnerability to future stress

Harvard Center for Developing Child
Survival Mode in the Context of Stress

• Leads to a constant state of high alert:
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Freeze

• Harder to:
  - Pay attention/stay on task
  - Regulate emotions
  - Follow rules
  - Interact with others
How Do Young Children Self-Regulate?

Turn and Talk

What are some ways you have observed that young children remain calm when stressed or calm down after being distressed?
What Helps to Strengthen Self-Regulation and Reduce Stress?

**Co-Regulation**
Warm, responsive caregiving and behavior coaching or scaffolding

**Skills Instruction**
In cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains of self-regulation

Understanding Co-Regulation
“Co-Regulation”

Caregivers, educators, and professionals interact with young children to provide:

- Warmth, nurturing, and a secure, safe relationship
- Support, coaching, and modeling to facilitate a child’s ability to understand, express, and modulate their feelings, thoughts, and behavior
Capacity for Co-Regulation: It Helps to Be Mindful

Interactions

Instruction
Mindfulness

Awareness resulting from non-judgmental attention to our sensations, thoughts, and feelings in the present moment
More mindful HS Professionals:

Home visitors reported better relationships with parents

Teachers have less conflict in their relationships with children.

Whitaker, et al., 2014, 2015
Mindfulness, Depression and Teacher-Child Interactions

Teacher Mindfulness

Teacher Depression

Teacher Child Relationship Conflict
MINDFUL MOMENT
Comments or Questions?
Co-Regulation
Strategies and Supports
Co-Regulation in Action

A co-regulating teacher/practitioner will

• Buffer children from stress and adversity in the environment
• Provide a warm, responsive presence in times of distress
• Provide consistent structure and positive discipline
• Teach and model self-regulation skills
• Monitor, prompt, and coach the use of skills
Co-Regulation for Infants

Infants

• 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
Co-Regulation for Toddlers

• What can the parent do to help this child manage separation?
• What can the teacher do?
Co-Regulation for Toddlers

Toddlers

- 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
Co-Regulation for Preschool-Aged Children

• Instruct and coach use of words to express emotion and identify solutions to simple problems
• Coach rule-following and task completion
• Model, prompt, and reinforce (or “coach”) self-calming strategies when child is upset
• Provide external structure and consequences
Coaching Self-Regulation
What to Coach with Preschoolers

• Using words (emotional literacy)
• Staying calm (emotion regulation)
• Using ignoring muscles (ignoring)
• Trying a friend’s idea (social flexibility)
What Else to Coach with Preschoolers

• Waiting (patience)/ using patience muscles
• Staying focused and thinking hard (attention)
• Doing it all by yourself (independence while working)
• Sticking with something when it is hard (persistence)
• Trying different ways to solve a problem (flexibility/problem-solving)
What do I actually do and say if I want to coach self-regulation?

• Describe examples of self-regulation that you see, using descriptive commenting:
  - “You are....”
  - “I see....”
  - “It looks like....”

• Praise self-regulation behaviors

• If a child is having trouble regulating:
  - Give coping statement
  - Make a positive prediction
Self-Regulation Coaching in Action
(Vignette)

Turn and Talk

• How is this teacher coaching?
• How are you using coaching currently?
• Is there anything new you might want to try with coaching?
What do you do to help children learn self-regulation skills?

Turn and Talk
When are good times to help children calm down?

- **Intervene Here**
- **Early Warning**
- **Irritability and Explosiveness**
- **Leave Me Alone**
- **Calm**
- **Intervene Here**
Teaching Calm-Down Strategies

• Talk about and model coping with frustration or anger

• Practice calm-down skills like:
  • Deep Breathing
    ▫ Smell the flower, blow out the candle
  • Imagery
    ▫ Imagine you are relaxing in a soft cloud
    ▫ Think of happy place
  • Positive self-talk
    ▫ “I can do it”
    ▫ “Everyone makes mistakes”
Space and Materials to Support Calming Down

Turn and Talk

- How might you use a calm-down spot in your classroom?
- What materials might you include in a calm-down spot?
- What rules might you set for your calm-down spot?
Take Homes

• Self-regulation:
  - Contributes to functioning throughout life
  - Can be taught like literacy
  - Is harder for those with significant stress
  - Is strengthened by structured classrooms with warm, supportive teachers

• Co-regulation:
  - Supports self-regulation in moment
  - Builds skills developmentally
  - Depends in part on teachers’ own self-regulation skills
  - * Produces significant improvement in child skills and behavior!*