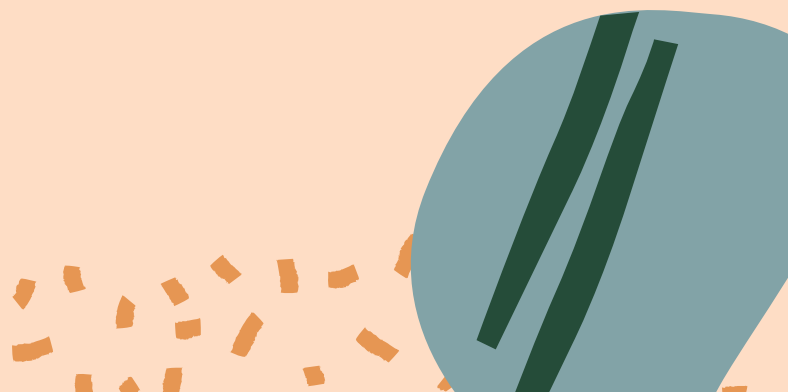
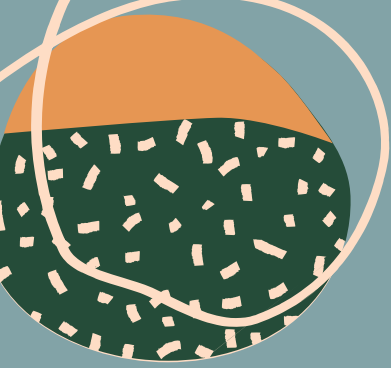


A Parent's Guide: Supporting Your Child's Self- Regulation

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What is Self-Regulation?

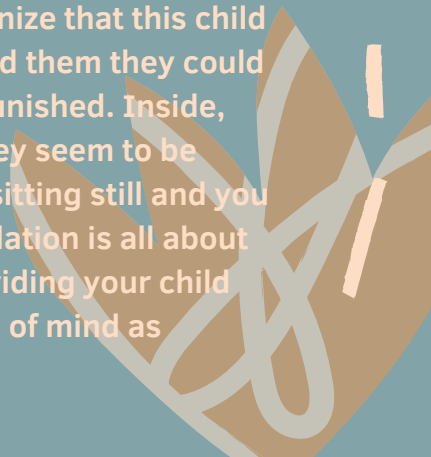
Self-regulation has been a topic of interest to many researchers, doctors, teachers, support workers for children with special needs, etc. for over a decade. According to researcher and professor Dr. Stuart G. Shanker, self-regulation sets the foundation for a child's long-term physical, behavioural, educational and even psychological well-being. So what exactly is self-regulation?

Self-Regulation **IS**...

- The ability to manage your behaviour, emotions and body movement when faced with a situation that is tough to handle while simultaneously remaining focused and attentive. It is dealing with stressors with a particular emphasis on being able to recover from these stressors.
- A different way of understanding why a child may be having behavioural, social, emotional and even cognitive problems.
- Learning to focus and shift attention, strategies to cope with strong feelings, controlling behaviours in order to achieve goals and get along with others.

Self-Regulation is **NOT**...

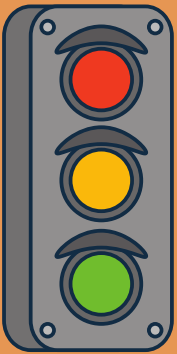
- **Self-control**
Although the two are often confused as one in the same, self-regulation is related to but not equal to self-control. Self-control is the ability to keep one's behaviour, impulses and emotions in check when tempted by other factors; therefore it is about inhibiting impulses. However, self-regulation involves identifying the triggers/causes and reducing the intensity of impulses in order to feel balanced and content in any given situation.
- **Compliance**
Just because a child is doing exactly what you want them to do (ie. staying quiet in the doctor's office), this does not mean that in that particular moment they are regulated or have had success with self-regulation. We must recognize that this child is acting this way likely because they want to get the cookie you told them they could have if they were quiet or even because they are scared of being punished. Inside, the child may be feeling extremely anxious and bothered even if they seem to be compliant. There is likely an underlying reason why they were not sitting still and you had to persuade them with an award in order to be quiet. Self-regulation is all about finding these underlying causes to problematic behaviour and providing your child with what they need to achieve this 'balanced' well-being and state of mind as opposed to trying to just eliminate the behaviour.



How Self-Regulation Works



Self-regulation is a skill that requires time to develop. This is why we would expect a 5 year old child to have more difficulties with self-regulation compared to a child who is 11 years old. This may come in the form of more tantrums at the age of 5 than at the age of 11. Having said this, not all 11 year olds have less tantrums than 5 year olds, and this is likely because of their difficulties with self-regulation.



Self-regulation can be compared to the function of a traffic light in today's busy society. A traffic light is designed to keep the flow of traffic (whether it be cars, bikes or pedestrians) controlled and moving at a specific time/rate. The 3 colours on the light tell others on the road what to do in order to keep the roads regulated and as safe as possible. This is similar to some signs that we may see in our child that signify to us that they may or may not be feeling in control or okay with a given situation. Just as accidents can occur on roads that are very busy or even on roads that are almost empty, one can become dysregulated and have moments that lead to "accidents" per say (ie. acting out, crying, drowsiness) in busy, quiet and/or undesired environments.

You can also think of self-regulation in a way similar to how a thermostat operates. Just as a thermostat is used to keep a space at a certain temperature or "set point", your child also has a certain "set point" which can be reached through regulating their emotions, behaviours and thoughts in ways that are manageable to them. A thermostat has the ability to follow and track temperature changes to know whether the room needs more/less cool air or heat in order to return to its "set point". Your child's regulation also requires following and tracking changes in any given situation in order to get themselves feeling right back to their resting "set point". This may include making adjustments to their environment or their bodies to help achieve their desired goals and expectations.






Why is Self-Regulation Important for Children?

Why should self-regulation be of interest to you? In the past couple of decades, research has shown that self-regulation can seriously influence an individual physically, behaviourally, educationally, psychologically, socially and cognitively. While research has investigated the effects that successful self-regulation has on a child's educational achievements and their ability to thrive in social contexts, there has been a common and recurrent finding; self-regulation development in childhood is an investment in your child's success regarding academic achievements, better relationships with others, self-satisfaction and the ability to control themselves and their well-being. Put in simpler terms, supporting your child's self-regulation will have long-lasting positive outcomes in all areas of their life.

Difficulties with self-regulation can be more common among younger children who's brains have yet to develop fully, as well as in children with neurological and developmental disorders. It is important to pay attention to these difficulties and encourage self-regulation in your home with your child(ren).





Dysregulation, Triggers & What it may Look Like

Dysregulation is a term used to explain the state of a child when they are unable to deal with and recover from their stressors. There are a variety of reasons why your child may be dysregulated. A big part of it has to do with factors that cause them particular stress. Children who are unable to self-regulate have many stressors in their lives that they are unable to deal with. Stress to your child may come from:

- Loud environments
- Strong smells, bright lights
- Too much sugar and/or junk food
- Not enough sleep and/or exercise
- Interacting with other children/unfamiliar people
- Changes to their typical routine

There are a number of visible signs to look for when determining if your child may be under stress. As stress manifests itself differently in different children, this means that visible signs of stress can also vary from one child to another. One of your children may present as restless under stress and your other child may seem quieter than usual. It is important to be aware of these signs. Below are a few of the more common signs to look out for outlined by Dr. Shanker when your child feels overwhelmed with stress:

- Seems defiant, argues a lot
- Extreme difficulties doing simple things
- Significant mood swings, never happy during the day
- Resorts to violence or wounding words when angry, becomes angry often
- Highly impulsive and easily distracted
- Has difficulties:
 - Paying attention and/or responding to their name
 - Tolerating frustration
 - Sitting still
 - Falling asleep
 - Getting along with other children
 - Arranging thoughts to think through simple problems
 - Refraining from the use of electronics

After reading this you may be realizing that something as simple as a lot of released anger or difficulties going to bed could really be attributed to your child's reaction to an excessive stress load. It is very easy to classify the above challenging behaviours as manipulative, defiant, attention seeking and oppositional, however it is important to understand these behaviours as a way of your child expressing that they simply cannot cope with their large emotions induced by stress. As parents, we need to further probe the underlying reasons to these behaviours to help children cope and be able to self-regulate.

When responding to dysregulation remember to:

- Remain calm
- Acknowledge your child's feelings
- Consider an end-goal once your child has returned to their "set-point"



Strategies to Help Support Your Child at Home



Although all children have different difficulties with self-regulation, there is always something you can do in order to help support your child's regulation. To better inform the efficacy of your support, you may first want to know the following:

What are your child's stressors?

Understanding what situations, environments, textures, smells, tastes, etc. that create feelings of anxiousness and uncertainty will help you detect and create a plan for supporting your child's self-regulation. It will help guide your reasoning for why your child may be dysregulated, what to avoid/remove from your child's environment to support them in the moment, as well as better prepare your reaction to their dysregulation when these stressors do appear.

How well is your child able to express their emotions and communicate their feelings?

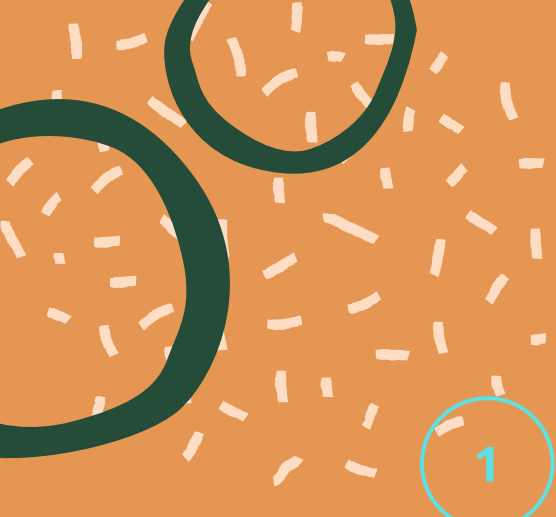
Knowing how emotionally literate your child is can help your response in supporting your child's regulation. If you know that your child has trouble communicating their emotions, you can help by:

- Narrating their feelings – ie. I am feeling sad because it is 6:00pm and dad is not home yet.
- Using and reading emotion books – These books provide a variety of things a child can do when they are feeling certain emotions (ie. when I am upset I can tell my mom, I can go to a quiet place like my room, etc.). This is typically used for younger children but is also good for children with autism spectrum disorder. It is a good way to showcase emotions for all kids even those without social communication needs.

What are some self-regulation strategies that your child is already doing in order to successfully wind up or wind down their energy levels?

Being aware of ways that your child self-regulates can help you recognize what works for them and what doesn't in order to inform your own support to their stressors. It can also signal to you when to jump in and/or when to let your child self-regulate independently. Seeing your child self-regulate can also reveal your child's progress with dealing with their stressors.





Self-regulation is all about having the ability to manage our emotions and respond to what our bodies need in an emotional situation. Below is a list of suggestions that will help support your child's self-regulation.

1

Stay calm, show empathy and model self-regulation.

In the very moment your child is reacting, they enter survival mode where listening to you and responding with logic is difficult. By staying calm, showing that you care and offering sensory experiences/other calming strategies, it can make all the difference in getting your child back to their "set point".

2 Be supportive and encouraging.

When dealing with an influx of emotions, your child may lose self-esteem and feel unheard. Be there for them with uplifting and positive words to coach them through a rough time.

3

Reduce unnecessary demands.

In an already fast paced world, your child may be dealing with more responsibilities than they can handle. Stay on top of your child's routines and help rearrange tasks/responsibilities/events so that your child is not overloaded.

4

Provide structure and consistency.

When children know what is expected of them and when an action/event is predictable, this can help to decrease levels of stress within your child.

5

Ensure your child is sleeping well, has a balanced diet and regular exercise.

All of these are essential to helping your child's brain function fully and appropriately.

6

**Spend quality time with your child regularly.
Listen attentively.**



7

Expand your child's vocabulary by teaching them about emotions and ways to stay regulated.



Model and help children provide opportunities to practice their skills.

9

Give specific and immediate feedback.

Here you should reframe failure as opportunities to learn and be better, focus on effort and not the end result.

10

Work together on a toolbox of coping strategies to use when dysregulated.



Physical break

Sports, having a dance party, going for a walk



Mental break

Listening to music, playing a board-game, doing a puzzle, watching a movie, arts and crafts



Sensory break

Making slime, eating something crunchy, soothing music/nature sounds, rolling down a hill



Positive self-talk

"10 things I am good at", "10 things I like about me", affirmations




Social support

Asking for help, talking it out with friends, teachers, parents, connecting with others



How Can YOU Practice Self-Regulation?



As you are your child's greatest role model, it is essential that your own ability to self-regulate is established. Because we are human, dysregulation will occur from time to time. Setting goals to better manage stressful situations and overwhelming emotions will only benefit your self-regulation. Your child learns a great deal from you and this includes self-regulation techniques through the very way you parent and manage your own feelings. You likely notice your child saying what they hear you say, eating what you like to eat and even acting like you do. This is why aiming to be the best version of yourself is extremely important both for your own and your child's health and well-being. Here are some things you can do to self-regulate:

- Listen to upbeat music when feeling down/when feeling tense, listen to calming music.
- Feed your mind, body and soul with healthy thoughts, foods and set realistic goals.
- Practice diaphragmatic breathing (deep breathing with your belly).
- Try to seek the bright/funny side in a disastrous situation.
- Think before acting. This may require naming your actions in a given moment and then realizing the consequences to your action/reaction.
- Don't dwell on a negative experience/event/emotion. Be sure to acknowledge it and move on. Think of alternative ways that could have worked better in that moment.



Resources

- <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/shanker.pdf>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3159917/>
- <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/PromotingSelf-RegulationInTheFirstFiveYears.pdf>
- <https://heartmindonline.org/resources/a-parents-guide-to-self-regulation>
- <https://www.foothillsacademy.org/community-services/parent-education/parent-articles/self-regulation-difficulties#:~:text=Self%2Dregulation%20is%20important%20because,children%20feel%20good%20about%20themselves>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/trouble-with-self-regulation-what-you-need-to-know>
- <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/PromotingSelf-RegulationInTheFirstFiveYears.pdf>