

Focused and Engaged: Finding Balance through Self-Regulation

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is our ability to respond to different situations and meet daily challenges. It involves matching our energy level, mood, emotions, and behaviours to what different situations call for. Self-regulation can be compared to the engine in a car; sometimes we feel like we're idling on low or revved up too high. In other words, we feel dysregulated or out of balance. When this happens, it can be difficult for children to do the things their parents or teachers ask of them.

Children develop self-regulation at different rates. They learn to regulate their feelings by having their physical and emotional needs met through caregivers, and by watching how their caregivers manage their own feelings and behaviors. Adults have learned through experience how and when to make the adjustments they need to be regulated. Children, on the other hand, often need to be taught this skill and given opportunities to practice it.

Your role as your child's caregiver is to be his or her 'co-regulator'. This means helping your child recognize and respond appropriately to stressors that trigger dysregulation in his or her life.

Is All Stress Bad?

It's important to recognize that not all stress is bad for children and youth. The stress reaction in the body is designed to protect us from dangerous situations and in small amounts stress can be helpful to increase our performance or success at a task. However, if there is too much stress experienced by the body, and for too long, it can negatively impact our physical and mental health.



Signs of Stress

You may notice outward signs of stress in your child such as crying or yelling, or inward signs of stress such as withdrawal or avoidance.

Other signs of stress may include:

- **Physical:** headaches, neck aches, indigestion, stomach aches, sweaty palms, racing heart, difficulty sleeping

- **Emotional:** anger, loneliness, diminished sense of humour, irritability, hopelessness, unhappiness, sensitivity, anxiety
- **Mental:** forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness
- **Behavioural:** needing to be in control, acting aggressive, feeling restless, grinding teeth, eating poorly, having nightmares, drinking, smoking or using drugs

What Can Parents Do As Co-regulators?

1. Recognize signs of dysregulation in your child
2. Identify the stressors or environmental cues that trigger dysregulation for your child
3. Teach your child how to recognize and communicate his or her feelings, and to become more aware of their response to stress
4. Help your child find a way to become more alert (if idling on low) or more calm (if revved up too high)

It's best to introduce and practice the following regulation techniques when your child is feeling *calm*. Doing so will help your child to strengthen these skills and be more apt, in kind, to using them in moments of struggle. For a time, however, your ongoing support will be needed to help your child use these strategies when feeling dysregulated.

Calming Techniques

When your child's body, mind, or mood is *revved up*:

- Take slow, deep breaths to help calm the body and the brain
- Use progressive muscle relaxation activities: tense then relax key muscles in your body, moving from head to toe
- Take a squeeze – use a stress ball or hug a stuffed animal
- Listen to calming music
- Distract with a fun activity or game (non-electronic)
- Block out noises, sights or smells that are overstimulating
- Take a break – go for a walk or splash cool water on your face

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- Practice mindfulness – focus your mind on an activity to get back to the present. For example, eat a small piece of fruit – focus on the taste, the smell and the feel of it

Alerting Techniques

When your child's body, mind, or mood is *idling on low*:

- Get their body moving through play and physical activity
- Use a fidget toy or wiggle cushion
- Chew gum
- Eat chewy, crunchy, or sour foods
- Drink cold, citrus-infused water

Staying Regulated

Be sure to spend time setting up your child or teen for success:

- Encourage positive self-talk – tell yourself things like “this will pass” or “I can do this” or “my turn will soon come, I can wait”
- Ensure your child gets enough quality sleep
- Eat well. Promote a healthy diet of wholesome foods
- Engage in regular physical activity – minimum 60 min/day
- Have and maintain a regular routine at home and at school
- Reach out to social supports – talk to a friend, family member, teacher, coach, or trusted adult

Resources

- Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life (by Dr. Stuart Shankar)
- Alberta Family Wellness:
<http://www.albertafamilywellness.org>
- Anxiety Canada: www.anxietycanada.com
- Teen Mental Health: www.teenmentalhealth.org
- Child Mind: www.childmind.org
- CYFAMH Intake: 780-342-2701
- Youth Addiction Services Edmonton: 780-422-7383
- Mental Health Crisis Team for Children and Youth: 780-407-1000
- Call 211 – Alberta Community resources
- CMHA Edmonton Distress Line: 780-482-HELP (4357)
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868