

BUILDING BLOCK 6:

CO-REGULATION

If someone speaks to you in anger, you have two choices if they want an answer. Choose to respond in calmness. You may calm them and you won't feel regret at your response.

- Nelson Angapak



BUILDING BLOCK 6: CO-REGULATION

Help families support students' emotional growth

Emotional self-regulation, or managing our emotions and behaviors, is a critical factor in success at school and beyond. Co-regulation is when one person helps another manage their emotions through warm and responsive interactions. Helping caregivers learn and practice co-regulation can help build healthier communities for our students and families.

Key Concepts and Research

We often seek support for managing our emotions. This can take the form of talking to a friend or loved one after a hard day, or talking to others about decisions we are making. For some of us, it is having others help us through emotional events or thoughts, calming down when upset, adjusting to changes, or handling frustrations. Co-regulation is the skill and art of modeling, teaching, supporting, and rewarding each other as we learn these skills. **Children look to the caring adults in their lives to help co-regulate their emotions and behaviors.**

For example, students who watch family members practice subsistence hunting often become skilled hunters. Students who have a strong early foundation

with words become strong readers. Likewise, children who have a foundation of social and emotional skills find it easier to self-regulate, managing difficult emotions without outbursts and undue frustration. Like hunting and reading, students can also develop these skills later. The key, however, is they need to be taught, supported, and given opportunities to practice. Caring adults have a key role in helping children build this foundation and helping them learn and strengthen skills later on.

When parents and teachers use similar strategies to foster social and emotional learning, it eases the transition between home and school and creates consistency and continuity in expectations for behavior.

- School-Family Partnership Strategies to Enhance Children's Social, Emotional, and Academic Growth

One author says emotional regulation “involves taking a pause between a feeling and an action—taking the time to think things through, make a plan, wait patiently.”¹

Another way of thinking about emotional self-regulation is the ability to manage attention and emotions well enough to complete tasks, organize behavior, control impulses, and solve problems constructively.²

These skills allow children to express themselves in ways that are true to their values or to reach a difficult goal even when navigating emotional stress. Having these skills can allow students to study instead of getting distracted before a test, for example.

*In its most basic form, self-regulation allows students to bounce back from failure and stay calm under pressure. These two abilities will carry students through life more than other skills.*³

Research supports these claims, as studies have found self-regulation is a key to mitigating or overcoming the impacts of trauma and stress.⁴ Research showed that stronger self-regulation predicts the following:

- lower rates of substance use and violence,
- higher income,
- better financial planning, and
- decreased long-term health costs.⁵

Controlling difficult emotions is much easier for children with the presence of a caring and supportive adult, which is where the concept of co-regulation comes in.

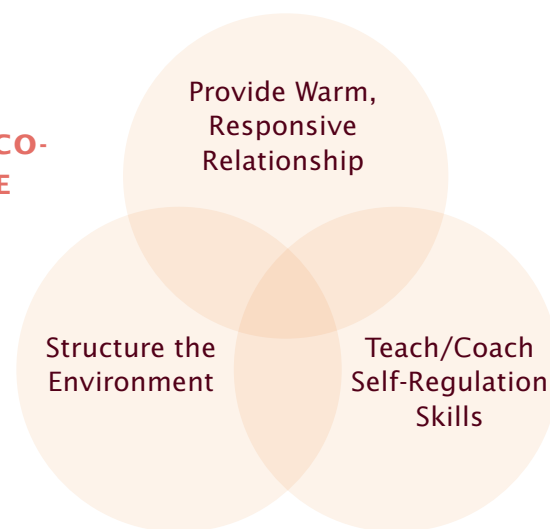
Pediatricians describe the importance of co-regulation early in life:

The simplest example of co-regulation is when you have an anxious child sitting on your lap; taking a deep breath soothes them and you at the same time. Your calm engenders their calm.

- Vince Gowmon, *Healing for a New World*

By using their voice, movements, affects, gestures, and intonations, parents and primary caregivers can help infants and young children. When babies grow up with co-regulation during moments of stress, such as when they are struggling with strong feelings, they begin to internalize and understand strategies for self-regulation and self-soothing—in their brains and in their minds.

HOW TO CO-REGULATE



Teaching adults in caregiving roles how to promote self-regulation can have powerful positive impacts. A research brief on co-regulation explained:

Co-regulation involves three types of caregiver support: a **warm relationship, environmental structure,** and **skills instruction and coaching.** These components will look different at different ages as child capacity for self-regulation grows, but co-regulation remains a critical resource for well-being into young adulthood.

Training and interventions to promote co-regulation can produce significant and meaningful changes in parent-child relationships, parenting skills, classroom climate, and caregivers' own self-regulation. Expansion of effective and consistent co-regulation across child, youth, and young adult settings may form a foundation for strong self-regulation development at a community level.⁶

CO-REGULATION IS A SKILL – IT CAN BE LEARNED

Researchers have found significant benefits from supportive caregivers, such as parents, teachers, coaches, and other mentors or family members, in interventions that support co-regulation. Using a control group for comparison, co-regulation interventions were found to have significant positive effects in the following ways:

- Parents improved their co-regulation skills and/or relationship with their children.
- Parents improved their positive behavioral management skills and knowledge of appropriate expectations for their children.
- Parents reported improvement in their own well-being.
- Teachers show similar improvements in their classroom climate and their own co-regulation and self-regulation skills.⁷



We are always co-regulating throughout the day based on how we are interacting with each other. Anytime you share an emotional energy exchange with another, it is co-regulation. Anytime you find genuine joy with someone or laugh at something funny with them, for example, you're really co-regulating.

*- Katie Crosby,
pediatric occupational therapist*

Co-Regulation in Action: Finding Ways Forward Together



Tyson, a high school teacher in Alaska, had a student, Carla, with a history of not turning in assignments. Carla had been diagnosed with major executive functioning disorder a few years earlier and had trouble starting and completing tasks. Tyson observed that her stress would increase with new study plans meant to help her. Her anxiety made it harder for her to complete assignments. Eventually, she became overwhelmed with the amount of work she hadn't turned in.

Tyson recognized that Carla needed help not just in managing her work, but in managing her emotions about her work. Tyson began checking in with Carla before class, popping in on small group discussions with her, and then checking in with her again after class. He helped her see where she was making progress and contributing, and he helped her see that the gap between where she was and what she needed to do was not insurmountable.

Tyson also learned through this process that there were other factors contributing to Carla's low level of participation in class. He noticed other students made fun of her for "not being smart." Understanding the social aspect of her stress changed Tyson's check-in conversations. He focused on helping Carla get past the anxieties preventing her from participating. He helped her name her anxieties and explained that others, including

himself, often experience the same emotions. Having a voice of support and understanding helped Carla manage her negative emotions, and she began to approach her work with a sense of possibility. As her participation increased, her confidence slowly grew, and she learned to better manage and overcome negative emotions that were blocking her success.

In conversations with Carla's family, Tyson shared what was working and asked Carla's parents what strategies they found successful. This exchange of ideas helped build trust and magnified the positive impact on Carla. Carla completed the semester project for the course, which had seemed unlikely earlier in the semester. Completing the project further boosted her confidence that she could manage her anxiety, organize her time effectively, and succeed in school.

Use language that everyone will understand, that the community will understand and connect with.

- Alaskan educator

Analysis: Finding Ways Forward Together

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

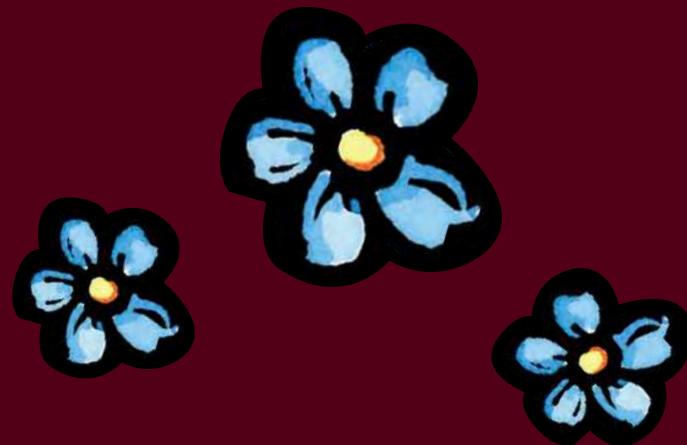
- What does Tyson recognize about Carla's struggle?
- How does Tyson work to support Carla in understanding and overcoming her struggles?
- How do Tyson and Carla's family work together to support Carla's emotional development?
- How does Carla's growing ability to regulate her emotions impact her school performance?

WHAT ELSE COULD TYSON DO?

- How might Tyson approach the issue of students mocking Carla?
- How else might Tyson help Carla's family learn to support Carla?
- What could Tyson learn from Carla's family?

PERSONAL EXTENSION:

- How do you recognize when students need emotional co-regulation?
- How do you co-regulate with students? Do you sometimes co-regulate without realizing that is what you are doing?
- What habits and instincts do you have that are helpful for co-regulation, and what habits might hinder co-regulation?



Tools and Strategies

There is a wide range of ways to build confidence of skills in families and school staff.

AGILE APPROACH.⁸ To help families learn to support their children’s emotional development, early childhood experts developed an acronym called AGILE. The AGILE Approach to Co-Regulating Responses advises families to pay close attention to these concepts:

- **A - Affect:** How your tone and expressions convey your emotions. In times of stress, is your affect loving, supportive, and soothing?
- **G - Gesture:** Facial expressions, hand gestures, body moment, posturing, and pacing all reflect your emotions and are felt by a child during your interactions.
- **I - Intonation:** Modulating the tone of your voice helps convey affect and social and emotional meaning. This is “felt” and “understood” long before words, and even after language develops, affect, gestures, and intonation convey the genuine meaning of the interpersonal exchange. This communication is stronger than words.
- **L - Latency (Wait):** Wait and give the child time to take in your gestures and intonations. Co-regulation requires patience.
- **E - Engagement:** Before you continue, be sure you have engaged the child.

CO-REGULATION IN THE ALASKAN CONTEXT.

Alaska communities have long-standing cultural practices to support co-regulation and self-regulation of emotions. These tools and practices can be an opportunity for the community, school, and families to share common language and practice. A key to success is recognizing culturally embedded practices as important forms of co-regulation. For example:

- Singing and dancing are forms of emotional self-regulation and co-regulation in many communities and cultures in Alaska.
- Many traditional arts and subsistence practices allow students to practice, teach, and model emotional self-regulation skills.
- Without naming it as “co-regulation,” many students co-regulate with a respected Elder, aunt, or uncle who may share a story or provide advice that helps students learn and practice new ways of coping.
- Cooking or baking together is a form of emotional self-regulation and co-regulation for many families.
- Many communities have protocols, ceremonies, and processes to help communities better understand expectations, rites of passage, grief, or each individual’s role in the community.

Recognizing that these activities and practices are important forms of co-regulation helps school staff support students and families in culturally responsive ways.

OTHER RESEARCH-BASED GUIDANCE. The following guidance for helping families learn about co-regulation is adapted from a report by Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and the federal government. The report also provides a list of existing training programs and interventions for educators and staff that address co-regulation topics.⁹

1. **Provide easily-accessible information to families and guardians about self-regulation development and caregiver co-regulation specific to each developmental stage from birth through young adulthood.** This information could be shared through tip sheets, informal discussion, or informational seminars in family-friendly settings. Information could highlight the three key components of co-regulation:
 - A warm, responsive relationship where children, youth, and young adults feel secure and cared for.
 - Environmental structure that makes self-regulation manageable and buffers against excessive stress.
 - Skill instruction and coaching in self-regulation.
2. **For families in high-stress situations and environments, provide interventions with demonstrated effects on parental self-regulation and co-regulation.** In families with risk factors, including teen parents, poverty, and mental health or substance use concerns, targeted interventions show promise for increasing parents' or caregivers' co-regulation capacity and skills.¹⁰

3. **For educators and other mentors, provide training in effective co-regulation skills.** Once staff have been trained in co-regulation, they can serve as coaches and role models of co-regulation for parents and guardians, expanding the impact. Training can address topics including:
 - Building a positive relationship with each child, youth, or young adult.
 - Structuring the environment to reduce regulatory demands and support skill enactment.
 - Communicating clear rules, expectations, and consequences.
 - Instructing, monitoring, and coaching specific, age-appropriate self-regulation skills.
 - Incorporating activities to practice self-regulation skills.
4. **Support educators and staff in their own self-regulation capacity.** Educators and caregivers will only be effective at co-regulation if they can successfully self-regulate. Staff supports may include mindfulness instruction, reflective supervision, and opportunities for personal “time-outs” when needed.

Co-regulation is being an extra brain, an extra calming center, for [a] child.

- Libby Bergman, Family Enhancement Center

Signs of Success and Growth

The following beliefs and strategies indicate growth in families' and educators' capacity and skills for co-regulation:

- Teachers and other school staff believe they have the capacity to support students through emotionally challenging moments.
- Teachers and other school staff recognize and identify local or cultural practices that support self-regulation and co-regulation.
- School staff understand the role adults have in modeling and supporting students' emotional well-being.
- School staff understand the role of emotional self-regulation in success in school and in life.
- School staff and families work together to develop common language around social and emotional values and skills.
- Families and school staff begin to develop a shared understanding of co-regulation and improve their skills together.
- Families and school staff believe their own capacity for emotional self-regulation is vital to supporting their students' emotional growth.
- Schools provide training for staff and families in emotional co-regulation.
- Schools reach out in multiple ways to help families understand and improve their capacity for co-regulation.
- Schools understand that Elders and "aunties" often support students' co-regulation and self-regulation.
- Teachers and families can describe emotional self-regulation and co-regulation in their own words.

Reflection Questions

Consider your school and community. You may want to discuss these questions with a colleague or community member, reflect on them on your own, or journal about them.

- How do I define co-regulation?
- How have I benefited from co-regulation from a colleague, friend, or parent?
- What do I want to learn about emotional self-regulation and co-regulation?
- Can I describe co-regulation in simple terms?
- How do families in my community co-regulate? What words do families use to describe this kind of support?
- In what ways do my students demonstrate emotional self-regulation?
- In what ways do my students need to grow in their ability to self-regulate?
- How can I continue to grow in my own ability to self-regulate?
- How can I make these skills more concrete for students and their families?
- What cultural practices can I build on?
- What are local ways of talking about self-regulation skills?
- Where are these skills already being practiced at home and in the community?