



Keep calm and self-regulate



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Why are we talking about self-regulation?

The early years is a crucial time for laying the foundations for lifelong learning. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) learning and development requirements set out what we must do in partnership with parents to support the children in our care. This includes helping them to adopt healthy habits to promote their mental and physical health; healthy children are more likely to grow into healthy adults.

Supporting babies and young children within the prime area of personal, social and emotional development is a good place to start when considering mental health and well-being for babies and young children. This includes supporting children to build relationships and to understand their emotions.

In addition, Ofsted (2023) states that 'Early self-regulation is also important for later educational outcomes. As children get better at controlling and directing their cognition, emotions and behaviour, they can get more from teaching and learning activities. In this way, self-regulation is linked to academic achievement from early childhood to adolescence and into adulthood.

Children's experiences from pre-birth (in the womb) and how their adults respond and interact (co-regulate) impact on how children self-regulate and learn to understand and cope with their emotions. Let's explore what some of these terms mean.....

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is complex, but in my book and training courses I describe it as: the ability to understand and manage your own energy, emotions, behaviours and attention in a socially acceptable way.

In time, self-regulation skills help us to:

- understand our feelings and emotions,
- manage and cope with disruptive environments and
- gain impulse control

These skills all help to provide a solid foundation for resilience.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to cope with and recover from stressful situations; I sometimes refer to this as 'bouncebackability'. Being able to bounce back after adversity can help protect and improve our mental health and reduce the risk and impact of mental health conditions, especially after setbacks in life and trauma such as bereavement. We can help children to build resilience and self-regulation skills; these can be learnt and developed through experiences. For example, supporting them to develop incremental, age and stage appropriate skills, learning about our feelings, what makes us, happy, sad, frightened, excited, etc and developing coping strategies.



Babies are not born with self-regulation skills; they are heavily reliant on their parents/carers to meet their needs and provide them with adequate care. Positive, nurturing and supportive relationships help babies and young children on their journeys to learning self-regulation skills.

Some adults will find it easier than others to self-regulate and some of this will be down to their lived experiences and relationships. However, if adults can not self-regulate effectively this will impact their ability to co-regulate with their children.

Photo credit [Woman in Army Uniform Holding a Boy Crying · Free Stock Photo \(pexels.com\)](https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-in-army-uniform-holding-a-boy-crying/)

What is co-regulation?

Definitions of co-regulation include terms such as:

the ability to regulate emotions and behaviours, to soothe and manage distressing internal sensory input or external situations with support and direction.

In other words, supporting children with regulating their emotions, thoughts and behaviours. It is like we are acting like the children's neocortex (thinking brain). We can observe and be aware of their reactions to stimuli and try to problem solve (find the triggers) and provide support.

It is important adults have the confidence and self-efficacy to support children through co-regulation. Being a consistent key person, acknowledging and affirming children's emotions, modelling new words to describe their feelings and emotions all help to make a real difference.



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Whilst parenting and caring for babies and young children can be extremely rewarding it can also bring its challenges. It's important the parents/adults look after their own mental well-being, which can mean being aware of their own triggers and anxiety and knowing who they can turn to for help and support.

In November 2020 the Royal Foundation and Ipsos MORI published research reporting that 'three in four parents (73%) agree that being a parent is stressful, with one in five (19%) reporting that it is very stressful.' This is a concern, if adults are not regulated and in control of their own feelings and emotions this impedes their ability to co-regulate with their children.

We can play an important part working in partnership with parents/carers to share experiences, ideas and techniques which can help to empower parents/carers to make a difference.

What does the EYFS say?

It is an EYFS statutory requirement that each child is assigned a key person.

'Their role is to help ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs, to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents and/or carers. They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate' (DfE, 2024).

Self-regulation is one of the early learning goals under the prime area of Personal, social and emotional development. One of these assessment points at the end of the reception class year is:

'Show an understanding of their own feelings and those of others and begin to regulate their behaviour accordingly'.

The EYFS programme for PSED states that children should learn to:

- understand their own feelings and those of others
- manage emotions, develop a positive sense of self, set themselves simple goals, have confidence in their own abilities, be persistent and wait for what they want and direct their attention as necessary

- look after their bodies, including eating healthily and managing personal needs independently
- make good friendships, cooperate with others and resolve conflicts peaceably

Children experience some very powerful emotions throughout their early childhood. These can include uncertainties around settling into childcare and during transitions frustrations, anger, worry and excitement, etc; these can all be overwhelming.

What can we do to support?

- Provide emotional security – especially in times of change
- Promote healthy eating, exercise, sleep and staying hydrated.
- Understand child development (separation anxiety, learning to sharing, developing empathy, etc)
- Provide children with opportunities, time and space to explore and express their emotions (this fosters resilience, reduces stresses, nurtures self-esteem, and helps them understand their own strengths and preferences)
- Sensory play – water, sand, dough, gloop can be calming
- Support children's emotional literacy
- Model language and strategies to communicate their wants, needs and feelings with others
- Understanding each unique child, their likes, dislikes, fears and sensory preferences
- Calm caves/corners or an area with reduced stimulus to retreat to can be helpful, a quiet time, quiet music reading a story may help to reduce stressors

If you are worried about a child

Children can experience some powerful emotions in early childhood, but we also need to remember that the ways in which child behave and any sudden changes to children's behaviours may indicate that they are at risk of harm or are experiencing / have experienced trauma.

You should always follow your setting's policies and procedures if you are worried about a child's well-being. This may include discussing concerns with your:

- Manager
- Behaviour lead, SENCo or DSL
- Speaking to parents and signposting them to their Health Visitor or GP
- Childminders need to report any concerns following their LSCP procedures.

References and Links to useful resources

Asquith, S (2020) Self-Regulation Skills in Young Children, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

DfE (2024) Early years foundation stage statutory framework: For group and school-based providers [Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage for group and school providers \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1241212/statutory-framework-for-the-early-years-foundation-stage-for-group-and-school-providers.pdf)

DfE (2024) Help for Early Years Providers – Mental health for early years children - [Mental health for early years children - Help for early years providers - GOV.UK \(education.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-for-early-years-providers-mental-health-for-early-years-children) accessed 14 February 2024

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