



SELF-REGULATION



(Image created by Copilot AI)

Family and Caregiver Guide

April 2024

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What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is a skill that helps people effectively manage their feelings, thoughts, attention, and behavior, even in tough situations. It is like having a mental toolkit that helps a person stay calm, make good decisions, and handle stress without getting overwhelmed.

Effective self-regulation involves recognizing and responding to stress in ways that restore energy and promote growth (Shanker, 2021).

Why is self-regulation important?

Being able to self-regulate means your child is in the optimal state for learning and for engaging with others.

Imagine a person's brain is like a car engine (Alert Program, 1996). When self-regulated, people's engines are running in the **"just right"** green zone. Here, they can think more clearly, problem-solve, complete tasks, and interact positively with others. Here, the **window of tolerance** is at an optimal level for learning, interacting, and overcoming stress.



("How does my engine run," n.d.)



("Open window with clouds," n.d.)

But when self-regulation breaks down, three things can happen.

1. **The engine revs too slowly and stalls (blue zone).** A stalled engine may lead to attention problems, disengagement, fatigue, or withdrawal. The person shuts down.
2. **The engine is starting to rev up (yellow zone)—consider if this is appropriate for the context or situation.** This may result in hyperactivity, impulsiveness, inability to complete a task or to persevere in times of difficulty.
3. **The engine revs too quickly and overheats (red zone).** This may result in temper tantrums, aggressive behaviour, fleeing, or an inability to follow a request or demand.

(Williams & Shellenberger, Alert Program, 1996)

Five Practices of Self-Regulation

Dr. Stuart Shanker identifies five practices to help people get back to the “just right,” green zone.

1. Reframe & Read Behaviour

View challenging behaviour as an attempt to communicate a message about an unmet need or a skill that needs to be developed. Read the signs of stress overload (changes in breathing rate, skin pallor, attentiveness, body posture, or voice, etc.).

2. Recognize Stressors

Identify factors that may trigger dysregulation.

3. Reduce Stressors

To help your child remain at the optimal level of engagement, remove some of the significant stressors.

4. Reflect

Help your child explore calming strategies so he/she can figure out those that are most personally effective.

5. Restore

Help your child figure out healthy ways to restore energy and recover from stress overload (exercising, being in nature, connecting with family & friends, etc.).








(Wiens, MEHRIT Centre, 2023)

What is a stressor?

A stressor is any factor that creates feelings of anxiety, fear, or tension to such an extent that a person's well-being is impacted. Some stressors may be small and manageable, while others may be toxic for learning, problem solving and engaging with others (Shanker, 2018). If we experience too many stressors at one time, our energy is greatly reduced making it difficult to complete even the simplest of tasks.

Five Domains of Stressors

Stressors from five categories interact with one another contributing to dysregulation or aggression. According to Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2022), Canadian children between **5-13 years** of age require **9-11 hours of sleep/night**; youth between **14-17 years** require **8-10 hours/night**. The same source indicates that ALL youth require **60 minutes** of exercise every day.

<p>Biological</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of sleep • Poor nutrition • Illness or pain • Loud noises, bright lights • Strong smells • Not enough exercise
<p>Emotional</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement • Anxiety or worries • Anger • Fear • Love • Discomfort
<p>Cognitive</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing thoughts • Poor memory • Multitasking • Making decisions • Auditory learning • Concentrating
<p>Social</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer pressure, problems with friends • Recognizing social cues • Group work • Meeting new people • Isolation • Social Media
<p>Prosocial</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding other people's perspectives • Coping with justice/injustice • Having compassion for others • Helping others • Coping with other people's strong emotions • Having moral dilemmas

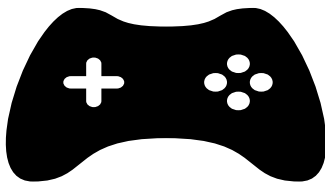
What are hidden stressors?

Hidden stressors are invisible pressures that can sneak up on us and make us feel tense, drained, aggressive, or overwhelmed without us even realizing the cause.

Hidden Stressors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excessive junk food or sugar• Sensitivity to visual clutter• Excessive screen time, gaming, or social media use

Too much screen time, including gaming, social media, and television, can make it hard for our bodies and brains to slow down and relax. Our brains become so used to the fast-paced, immediate gratification of screens and gaming, that we might have difficulty adjusting to slower paced experiences that require a sustained focus. This can affect how well we can control our emotions and actions. Just like a car needs a break to cool down, our brains need breaks from screens to help us stay calm and focused (Kawartha Pine Ridge..., n.d.).

Also, screens and phones emit blue light that signals to our brain that it is still day time. As a result, our bodies do not begin producing melatonin, the hormone that helps us feel sleepy. To help youth sleep better, it is a good idea to **turn off screens one hour before bed** (Public Health Agency of Canada, Government of Canada, 2019).



Signs of Stress Overload

- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Easily upset, even over trivial things, trouble calming down when this happens
- Volatile mood – extreme changes in mood
- Trouble paying attention or even hearing your voice
- Frequent outbursts of anger, sadness, fear, or anxiety
- Highly impulsive and agitated
- Resistant to attending school or participating in community events

(Shanker, 2018, Signs section).

Why should we reduce stressors?

If people are chronically under stress, it becomes increasingly difficult to remain calm (Shanker & Hopkins, 2020).

Dr. Dan Siegel suggests that we visualize the brain as a clenched fist. The hand becomes a model of our brains—with an upstairs and a downstairs brain.



(Siegel & Bryson, 2015)

The *upstairs brain*, also known as the thinking, learning or wizard brain, is where people make good decisions and respond appropriately, even when they are upset. It is where we plan, reason, make decisions, and regulate our behaviour and emotions.

The *downstairs brain*, also known as survival or lizard brain, is responsible for big emotions. There is nothing wrong with feeling love, anger, disappointment, excitement, or frustration, especially when the upstairs brain is still “talking to” the downstairs brain as is the case when the fist is closed. The upstairs brain can then help the downstairs brain calmly respond to stressors.

The *downstairs brain* is also the primitive and defensive part of the brain that can trigger fight, flight, or freeze stress responses. When a person “flips his lid,” he is functioning in the downstairs brain and is unable to think clearly, process language or respond to directives.

Calming Strategies

Try practicing calming strategies with your child. When doing so, inhale deeply and exhale slowly.

1. Hand Clenching and Relaxation

Tightly clench your fists for a few seconds. Slowly release your fists and focus on the sensation of relaxation spreading through your hands and fingers.

2. Shoulder Shrugging

Raise your shoulders towards your ears, holding the tension for a few seconds. Then, lower your shoulders while exhaling slowly, allowing the tension to melt away.

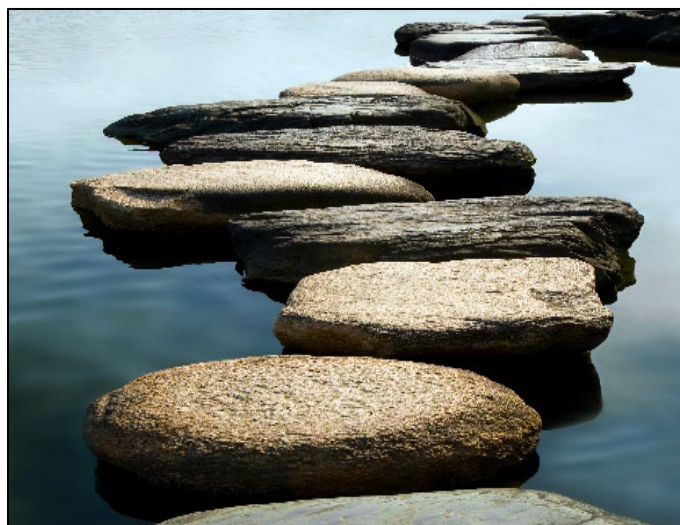
3. Leg Tensing

Sit comfortably, tighten the muscles in your legs by flexing calf and thigh muscles. Slowly release the tension while breathing deeply, feeling the relaxation spread through your legs.

4. Pressure Points

Use your index and thumb to apply pressure and massage the following points. Breathe slowly, deeply as you massage.

- Third eye - the point right between eyebrows, where the bridge of the nose meets the forehead
- Between the thumb & index finger
- Point where neck & shoulder meet.



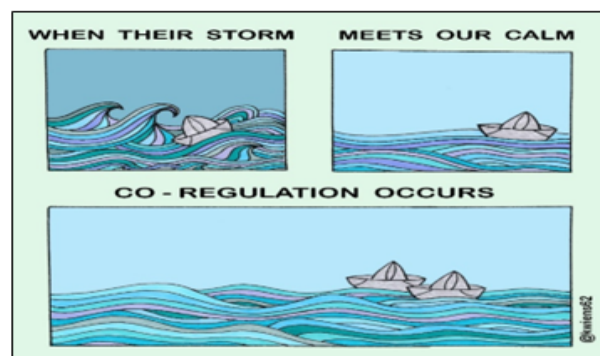
Co-Regulation at Home and School

“Children can only learn to self-regulate when they have the repeated experience of being co-regulated by caring adults” (“When their storm meets our calm,” 2023).

Co-regulation is the process where individuals learn to manage emotions and stress by interacting with others in a safe, calm setting. It happens when someone calmly adjusts their tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language to regulate another person's behavior and feelings.

Co-regulation Tips

- Know the child's early signs of dysregulation
- Stay calm and talk in a slow, soft voice
- Use fewer words
- Model calming strategies (breathing deeply, pressing pause, sipping water, etc.)



(Wiens, MEHRIT Centre, 2023)

How can you support your child with self-regulation?

- Understand and reduce your child's stressors
- Model calming strategies
- Co-regulate
- Play games that have set rules
- Limit screen time
- Spend time outdoors
- Encourage ample sleep (8-11 hrs./night)
- Provide a balanced diet
- Encourage 60 min./day physical activity
- Provide structure and routine



(Image created by Copilot AI)

How is self-regulation encouraged at school?

- Teaching students the 5 self-regulation practices (Reframe Behaviour, Recognize Stressors, Reduce Stressors, Reflect, Restore Energy)
- Providing visual reminders and verbal cues to prompt calming strategies
- Modelling appropriate actions, emotions and stress responses
- Creating calming environments to which students can retreat when feeling overwhelmed



(Image Created by Copilot AI)

Self-Regulation Takes Time & Practice

When teaching children self-regulation, adults should frequently model calming strategies and provide multiple opportunities for practice. It is crucial to do this when children are calm and alert (in their "upstairs" brain). Trying to teach self-regulation when kids are melting down (in their "downstairs" brain) reduces their ability to listen, reason, and perform tasks. Building self-regulation skills is a life-long process -- be patient and stay the course.

[NESD Self-Regulation Video for Families & Caregivers](#)

To watch a short video on self-regulation, please scan the QR code below.



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