Co-regulation and Self-regulation

by Dr. Mine Conkbayir

Self-regulation involves children's developing ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour to enable them to act in positive ways toward a goal. The rapid brain development which takes place in early childhood paves the way for the growth of self-regulation, which develops both through the maturing of the brain's neural systems and through opportunities to practice. It continually develops through to adulthood, with further development of self-regulation taking place in adolescence. Self-regulation is recognised as crucially important in young children's development, providing the foundation for lifelong mental health and holistic wellbeing. A child's ability to self-regulate at just four-years-old shown to be a better indicator of school success than IQ.

Self-regulation depends on and grows out of co-regulation, where adults and children work together toward a common purpose, including finding ways to resolve upsets from stress in any domain and return to balance. Over time and with consistent practice, the process shifts from co-regulation between adult and child to the child's self-regulation. The flexibility of brain cells and pathways in the early years means that the brain's architecture is altered in response to the quality and consistency of co-regulation experiences, building capacity for self-regulation.

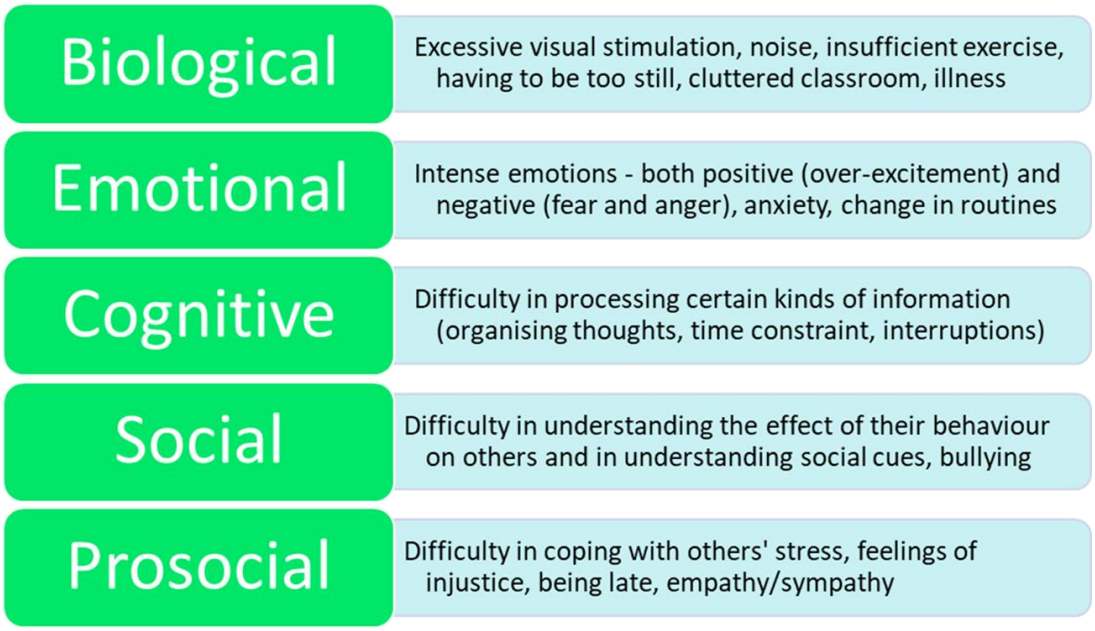
What is Self-regulation?

Self-regulation (SR) refers to an individual's ability to manage their own emotions, thoughts and subsequent behaviours. When a child is able to self-regulate, they are able to think before they act and critically, they are able to *choose* how they respond to the stressors in or around them. Stressors might be internal (arising from within) - such as illness, tiredness or hunger, or external (environmental factors) – such as witnessing or experiencing abuse, a lack of emotional support or a lack of physical activities.

SR is said to exist across five domains. These being:

1. Biological
2. Emotional
3. Cognitive
4. Social
5. Prosocial.

The table below shows just a few common stressors across the five domains, which can cause an infant or child to become dysregulated. When an infant or child becomes dysregulated, it may show up in their mood, attention, physical wellbeing or their behaviour.



Stressors exist across each of the five domains of self-regulation. It is important that you hold in mind that each of these stressors will not be the same for every child. What dysregulates one child, may not dysregulate another. Stressors and recovery from these depend on:

- The unique child
- Their age
- The presence of neurodivergence
- The resources they have access to in their environment
- The quality and consistency of co-regulation they receive from the adults around them.

Self-regulation must not be confused with compliance, such as sitting still and listening when expected to. A child who is stressed and struggling to resist the impulse to move or speak is very different from a child who is calm and alert, in a balanced state of feeling, thinking and behaving. Children can fluctuate in their capacity to self-regulate just as adults can. It is not a fixed state. However, noticeably large regressions may indicate high levels of distress or be in response to a traumatic experience.

When and how self-regulation develops

Self-regulation develops from in utero, primarily through the caregiver's chemical signalling. This means that maternal stress levels (for example, anxiety and depression) directly affect the foetus' brain development and future emotional regulation through the placenta. Sensory-motor development, which begins in the first trimester, paves the way for meaningful movements (such as touching, kicking and rolling) in response to the caregiver and in-utero environment, in the second trimester.

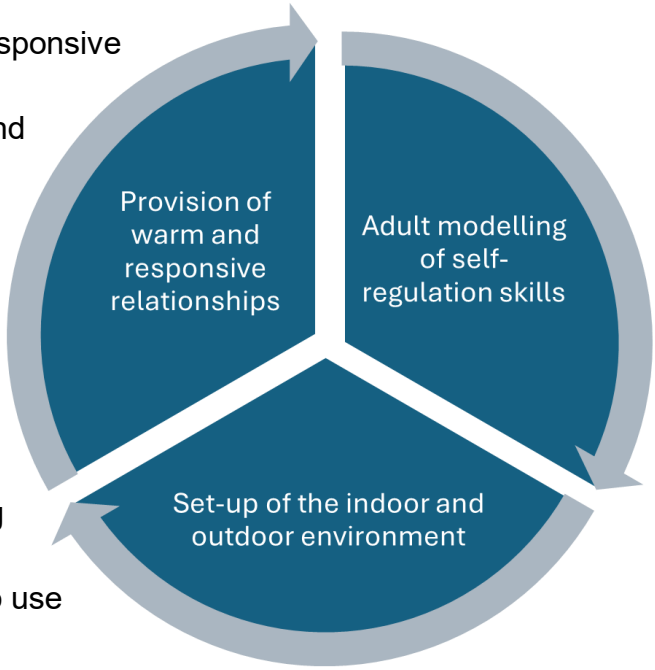
This prenatal period is the first stage of co-regulation, where the mother's calm state helps build a healthy foundation for the infant's nervous system.

What is co-regulation?

Co-regulation is the supportive process whereby adults help children to manage their emotions and behaviours, especially when infants and children have not yet developed the skills to do so independently. Through warm, responsive, and consistent interactions, adults act as external guides, soothing, modelling and supporting children as they navigate challenges, stress or overwhelming feelings. Over time, these experiences provide children with the modelling and reassurance they need to gradually internalise self-regulation skills, making co-regulation a vital aspect of emotional and social development.

A pedagogy which includes co-regulation strategies will help children develop self-regulatory skills. Researchers have identified three basic strategies for co-regulation:

- **Positive Relationships** – Provide a warm, responsive relationship where children feel respected, comforted and supported in times of stress, and confident that they are cared for at all times.
- **Enabling Environments** – Create an environment that makes self-regulation manageable, structured in a predictable way that is physically and emotionally safe for children to explore and take risks without unnecessary stressors.
- **Learning and Development** – Teach self-regulation skills through modelling, suggesting strategies, providing frequent opportunities to practice, and scaffolding to support children to use self-regulation skills.



It might be helpful to think of this CO-REG acronym when reflecting on your role in co-regulating children:

Without co-regulation, a child will struggle to develop healthy self-regulatory skills. The fundamental importance of co-regulation cannot be over-stated.

Key points:

Self-regulation involves children's developing ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour.

Self-regulation grows out of co-regulation, where adults and children work together toward a common purpose, including finding ways to resolve upsets from stress in any domain and return to balance.

The foundations of emotional and cognitive self-regulation in the early years are integrally tied together, and both are necessary for behavioural self-regulation.

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The single most important discovery that scientists have made about the Early Years is that it is by being regulated that a child develops the ability to self-regulate.

Mine Conkbayir, 2026