

Co-Regulation in Practice

STRATEGIES FOR PRACTITIONERS WHO SERVE YOUTH AGED 14-24:

GROUP AGREEMENT STRATEGY

Self-Regulation is a central ingredient in lifelong success, predicting healthy relationships, economic self-sufficiency, and physical and emotional well-being. Adolescence involves rapid change in youths' brains and bodies, and is therefore an important time to foster self-regulation development. Adults play a significant role in this development.

Adults can enhance youth self-regulation by providing **co-regulation** support. Through co-regulation, adults form relationships where youth feel cared for and known; co-create safe and nurturing environments; and give youth opportunities to practice self-regulation skills and reflect on how to apply them in their lives.



Self-regulation

/self reg je' lei sh(a)n/noun

the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed behavior. Examples include calling a time out in an argument for the good of the relationship, or avoiding an impulse purchase to save money for something of greater value to you in the future.



Co-regulation

/co reg je' lei sh(a)n/ noun

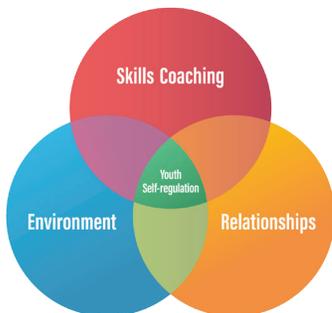
the supportive process between adults and youth that integrates three key types of support: 1) providing warm, responsive relationships, 2) creating supportive environments, and 3) coaching and modeling self-regulation skills.



Practitioners can use strategies like the one in this handout to provide co-regulation support for youth.

Co-Regulation

The complete Co-Regulation in Practice Series offers six strategies to foster self-regulation, each targeting one part of Co-Regulation.



Relationship Strategies — Welcoming, Positive Praise



Environment Strategies — Group Agreement, Rest and Return



Self-Regulation Skills — Breath to Refocus, Take Note



GROUP AGREEMENT



Whether in a typical classroom setting or in a community-based workshop, collaborating with youth to co-create a safe, trusting environment is an important key to a successful group.

Facilitators often experience time pressure. When this happens, it is a natural response to cut activities short and lecture more. However, implementation science says that experiential learning is more effective than lecture. One essential program activity that is often shortchanged is the process of establishing a cohesive workshop climate or “group culture” early on in the program. Facilitators can do this by asking youth to identify relationship values that they can practice as a group, and then bringing the group to agreement about how to demonstrate their values as participants. Group agreement can allow for more authentic engagement with the content and permit greater group cohesion—outcomes that enhance learning in programs.

Establishing collective group agreements provides structure and builds predictability. Structure allows us, and the youth we work with, to feel safe. When we feel safe, we are free to be ourselves, open to learning, and can establish the connections that reduce isolation and help us feel we belong.





ESTABLISHING A GROUP AGREEMENT

The Strategy:

It is ideal to establish a group agreement in the first workshop or meeting, but if you don't have the luxury of doing this, it's okay to roll out the process a few sessions into the series or school year. If you are starting midstream, prepare for some resistance, but take it in stride and know that there is still value in the process.

There are two aspects of the Group Agreement strategy: 1) the process of establishing group values and agreement, which is important in and of itself, and 2) the way you maintain accountability for them on an ongoing basis. This module provides recommendations for both.



1 Language Is Key.



5 Include a Refocusing Strategy.



2 Start with Values.



6 Get Agreement.



3 Use the Workshop like a Relationship Lab.



7 Post the List, Adjust as Needed.



4 Add Your Values Last.



ESTABLISHING A GROUP AGREEMENT



Language Is Key:

Avoid the notion that you are drafting a list of “ground rules” or “norms.” “Rules” imply a power dynamic of “enforcer and follower,” which is counterproductive to your group process. “Norms” suggest a common way of being, a word which may challenge the independence adolescents seek. The goal here is to enter into an agreement about a set of values and how they’re enacted for the collective well-being of the group. For this reason, it works well to call the strategy Group Agreement or Group Values.



Start with Values:

Rather than coming in with a list of *behaviors* you expect from youth, ask youth to list *values* (e.g., equality) and then explore what that value looks/sounds like in practice (e.g., asking for perspectives on a topic from different genders). Get specific. Allow time to explore each value listed. What does enacting this value look like? What does it sound like? How does it feel?



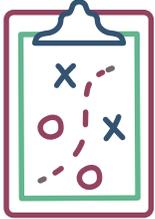
Use the Workshop Like a Relationship Lab:

It can be enlightening to suggest that youth think of the workshop environment as a relationship and generate their list of values with that in mind. What values do they want to experience in a healthy relationship? Can they practice those values in a group workshop setting to get clearer on what it’s like to enact and experience them?



Add Your Values Last:

Pre-consider the values you want to include, but refrain from listing them before youth have spoken. Once youth have generated a list of about four values, you can explore adding your ideas to the list.



Include a Refocusing Strategy:

When the group gets off track, use a pre-established strategy to calmly bring everyone back to focus. Add the refocusing approach to your Group Agreement (see the script for an example of language). This enhances trust. We offer the *Breath to Focus* strategy as a tool.



Get Agreement:

Agreement from each participant is critical for ongoing accountability. Depending on your context, if possible, try to get a visible (not just a verbal) agreement. Agreement can be achieved by asking youth to stand, raise their hand, add their signature to the values list, etc. This will support the group in times when the agreement is broken—which is to be expected.



Post the List, Adjust as Needed:

Keep the agreement alive throughout the program. It can be helpful to have the list visibly posted for the group and to prepare for conversations when the group dysregulates. At any moment, it is okay to call the group agreement and values to mind and make adjustments as the group requests.



SAMPLE SCRIPT

~ 20 MIN

FOR ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING A GROUP AGREEMENT

Before you begin

CONSIDER YOUR VALUES

- Before engaging the group in a collective value-setting exercise, consider the values you would like to recommend. We suggest several examples below. You can add your values after those recommended by youth.
- Think about any commitments you might want to make to the group as their facilitator. One example is committing to staying calm and using the refocusing strategy when the agreement is broken. Of course, this is often easier said than done! Our own loss of control or disengagement escalates group dysregulation, and given our goal to model good self-regulation for youth, staying calm ourselves is a key opportunity to demonstrate accountability for the agreement as the adult. You can communicate that even if you feel you are being disrespected, you will treat them with respect. Commit to not raising your voice and becoming an “enforcer” (i.e., commit to making the *Breath to Focus* your own self-awareness practice and be intentional every time you use it—and state this explicitly to your group/class).

EXAMPLES OF VALUES TO RECOMMEND AND DISCUSS WITH YOUTH*

- **One Mic** (This means not talking when someone else is talking.)
- **Respect and Nonjudgmentalism**
- **Encouraging Each Other** (We all need others to support us when we feel overwhelmed. Encouraging our peers to manage their thoughts and emotions helps everyone stay on track.)
- **Authentic Engagement** (This means making a commitment to coming to class and trying the skills in your own way.)
- **Growth Mindset** (This means acknowledging that we all make mistakes and that setbacks are opportunities for learning and growth.)



EXAMPLES OF VALUES TO RECOMMEND AND DISCUSS WITH YOUTH* (CONT'D)

These are important values to add as the facilitator. They will be added after youth share their values.

- **Rest and Return** (This means taking a mental or physical break until you are able to refocus and return to the class.)
 - Sample language is included in italics in the green callout boxes:

Sometimes the stuff we're talking about can bring up intense feelings. If that happens to you, it's okay to take a break and come back in a few minutes.

- **Breath to Focus** (This is a refocusing technique where we take an inhale and an exhale and repeat as needed.)

***Note:** We have **not** included confidentiality because it is usually unrealistic, especially given the use of social media. You can have a discussion about confidentiality, but (given social media and peer influence) unless everyone in your group is likely to keep things confidential, it is wise to avoid setting a false expectation.



Establishing the Group Agreement

FRAME THE PROCESS

- Sample language is included in italics in the green callout boxes:

We will be spending some time together talking about relationships. Since healthy relationships don't come naturally, it helps to practice the skills that make them great. We'll start by thinking about some of the values that make a relationship feel supportive. Or in other words, let's talk about what we want this group to be like. We will get the most out of our time together if we decide how our interactions should feel and sound. This is how we work together to create the culture and experience of our group. It's kind of like a group agreement.

We think of it as a group agreement rather than ground rules or group norms. Let's talk about why. What's the difference between a rule and an agreement?

- You are looking for the following kinds of responses (feel free to share these responses if youth do not say them): “Rules have an enforcer and a follower.” “When you break a rule, you get punished.” “Agreements are based on the agreement of everyone involved. If they are broken, there is a conversation, not a punishment.” For example, “I thought we agreed to [fill in the blank]. Do you still agree?” “Agreements give everyone a say in the matter.”

IDENTIFY VALUES

I'm not going to ask you to say it out loud, but take a moment to think about something you want to learn from this program/ class/workshop.

- Give an example (“I want to learn how to deal with conflict.”) Pause to let youth consider the question.



With what you want to learn in mind, think about—but don't share out loud—the kinds of things that have made it hard to get what you want out of a group/class in the past—maybe it is behaviors or things that distracted you (like people having side conversations or getting a text), things that made you feel like you couldn't trust the group (like judgmental comments from others or teachers who seem like they don't care), or things going on inside of you (like stress, or thinking about what is happening later in the day). What makes it hard to get what you want from a class? (Remember, keep it in your head.)

List Values from Youth:

- *Now that you know what you want to learn, and what you don't want to experience in our group, I'd like to invite your input to list a few key values we want for our group. What do you value that would make this group feel safe and establish trust?*
- Generate a list of about 4-8 values, writing ideas on large easel paper (the idea is that you will repost at each workshop) or a white board for that group. Be sure there is space between each suggestion to include a definition, as necessary. If youth have trouble starting, feel free to give an example.

Get Specific. Describe Behaviors that Demonstrate Each Value:

- For each item, ask:
*When you see this value in action, what does it sound like?
What does it feel like? What does it look like? Does anyone have another idea of what it could mean?*



- Write the behaviors next to their associated value (e.g., if “inclusivity” is the value, write behaviors that demonstrate that value in action, like “calling on different types of people” or “don’t dis somebody’s idea.” Be sure to get input from diverse participants before moving on. (This will make establishing an agreement easier.)

Add Your Values as Needed:

- Once the group is reaching a pause, you can include suggestions of your own and the reason you included them. Be sure to give youth time to respond and offer input on each value and how it might look in action.

I have a few thoughts about what can help make a group feel safe.

- Add and discuss your recommendations and their associated behaviors. The *Rest and Return* and refocusing strategies come after this step.

Add Language to Define *Rest and Return*:

Sometimes the stuff we’re talking about can bring up intense feelings. If that happens to you, it’s okay to take a break and come back in a few minutes. We call this Rest and Return. This doesn’t necessarily mean you leave your seat—it could just mean putting your head down or looking out the window. Just take a moment to take a mental break and breathe. And, as you do, take care not to check out for the rest of class. That’s why it’s called Rest and Return. This practice means you agree to refocus once you’ve taken a quick break. Does that sound okay to you?



COME TO AGREEMENT

Ask about Disagreement and Adjust As Needed:

It looks like we have a nice list here (restate each value). Is there anything on this list that anyone does not agree with?

- Resolve any disagreement by asking the person for whom agreement is not yet possible.

What words could we change to make this list work for you?

Get Visible Agreement from All:

- Visible agreement means everyone in the group can visibly see a sign of one another's agreement. If needed, you can add an audible agreement, too.

I would like you to [stand/raise your hand] (pick one) if you agree to be part of this group and will work to maintain these values.

- Alternatively, you can ask participants to show their agreement by signing the list of values.

Share Your Commitments to the Group:

Finally, I would like to make a commitment to you by adding one more value: a refocusing technique called Breath to Focus. Even though we agreed to all the other agreements, most of us know that sometimes we get off track.

Sometimes we'll be talking when someone else is talking. Or sometimes we might get upset and not uphold our agreement of (insert appropriate value, e.g., respect). These things happen. We're human beings. We make mistakes sometimes.



What I'd like to do is when something like that happens, when we get off track, I'm just going to gently say to the group, Hey all, let's go ahead and take an inhale ... and an exhale. We will do it together. It might feel odd at first, but we will get used to it and see how it works to train our brains.

CLOSE THE PROCESS

- It's okay to create language that is authentically yours. The important thing is to develop a strategy, share it with the group, commit to using it, and model it as you use it.

My commitment to you is that I'm not going to yell at you. I'm always going to ask the group to refocus in a calm tone like this. I'm always going to treat you with respect and dignity. Is that okay with everyone? That that's how I'll deal with it when we get off track.

- Thank the group for engaging in the group agreement setting exercise.



Refocusing the Group As Needed

WHEN THERE IS GENERAL DYSREGULATION

- As you acknowledged when setting the group agreement, there will come a time (or many times) when you will need to refocus the group. To do so, begin by taking a deep breath or two yourself, and then repeat your *Breath to Focus* phrase calmly until the group focuses. Breathe along with the group as you coach them.

Hey all, let's go ahead and take an inhale ... and an exhale.

WHEN THE GROUP AGREEMENT/VALUES ARE BROKEN

- If an individual or few individuals break the group agreement, you can pause and bring attention to the list of values. Avoid calling out any participant or drawing attention to negative behavior. Instead, address the group as a whole.

*I am noticing that we're getting off track with our agreement.
I thought we agreed to [restate value that is being broken].
Do you still agree? (discuss)*

It's normal to get off track once in a while. And when we do, we can just remind each other of the things we wanted to get out of the workshops and, without judgment, hop back on the agreement train again. If there are parts of our group agreement that we need to revisit, just let me know. These are our values, and we can work together to protect and adjust them. My goal is for this group to be a caring and safe place for every one of us.

- Throughout the workshop series, don't hesitate to acknowledge positive behaviors that demonstrate adherence to group agreement. For example, "Michael, I appreciate you coming tonight even though I know it was hard to get here," or "Jameelah, I know you and Beth disagree, but you handled that difference of opinion with a lot of respect. Nicely done."
- Positive Praise* interspersed into the workshop can reinforce more of what you want to see while also building supportive relationships with the group.



Suggested Citation

Frei, A., and Herman-Stahl, M. (2021). Co-Regulation in Practice Series. OPRE Brief #2021-91, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM)

The SARHM project was a study that aimed to increase the capacity of practitioners in youth-serving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs to promote self-regulation development among participants. It is funded through a collaboration between the federal Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation (OPRE) with the aim of further advancing relationship health and self-sufficiency by applying a developmental frame to human services. SARHM translated theory about co-regulation—the interactive process of adult support for youth self-regulation—into practice by developing a set of strategies that aligned with an evidence-informed co-regulation framework. The strategies were developed based on theory and evidence, but have not yet been tested for effectiveness.

As part of a nationwide initiative to promote healthy relationships in adult individuals, couples, and youth, OFA funds comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services. The SARHM project team partnered with two youth-serving HMRE programs to conduct formative, rapid-cycle evaluations to develop and refine co-regulation strategies by pilot testing them, providing data about their implementation, and refining them in the field without changing their curricula. Visit [OPRE's website](#) for a [detailed final report](#) on SARHM (Baumgartner et al., 2021). A list of additional products, including a [guide for practitioners](#) (Frei et al., 2021), a [brief describing a preliminary draft co-regulation measure](#) (Alamillo et al., 2021), and additional resources are available on OPRE's website under SARHM.