



Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience

Convening Summary

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Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge input and feedback of attendees at both the March 2019 and June 2021 convenings on co-regulation supports for youth with foster care experience. Words and concepts from participants are included throughout this summary.



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On June 7 and 10, 2021, the Children's Bureau and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) brought experts together virtually to discuss findings from the [Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience](#) report. Participants included child welfare program directors, researchers with expertise in self-regulation and child development, federal staff, foster parents, and therapists, with several attendees having lived experience in the child welfare system. The purpose of this convening was to discuss findings from a project examining co-regulation for older youth in or transitioning out of foster care, and to identify next steps for advancing research and creating practice change in the field. Facilitators shared the report with participants ahead of the convening to allow them time to review and reflect on the findings.

This convening was a follow up to a meeting held in March 2019, involving a large majority of the current participants. During the 2019 meeting, experts discussed how the child welfare system can support the development of older youth in or transitioning out of foster care. They discussed the value of focusing on co-regulation (see definition in text box) and identified specific gaps in knowledge. Several priorities for work in this area emerged including: (1) connecting co-regulation to work in child welfare on relationships and trauma, (2) identifying actionable co-regulation steps for caregivers, and (3) considering systems-level factors needed to support co-regulation work more broadly (see [Meeting Summary](#)). Participants also identified many practice-focused questions. These included how to strengthen the capacity of foster parents and caseworkers to provide co-regulation. They were also interested in how to make co-regulation accessible to all caring adults and applicable within day-to-day interactions.


Co-regulation: The supportive process by which caring adults and peers promote positive youth development through caring, consistent, & responsive relationships; the co-creation of supportive environments; and intentional and developmentally-informed day-to-day interactions.

To address the questions and priorities identified at the 2019 meeting, OPRE commissioned Child Trends to conduct a series of activities, as follows: 1) review existing literature, 2) conduct a scan of programs using co-regulation approaches 3) summarize findings in a comprehensive report; 4) develop a series of tip sheets, and 5) prepare a publication for a peer-reviewed journal.

Participants Provided a Wide Range of Expertise and Perspectives

The first day of the June 2021 convening began with non-federal experts introducing themselves and sharing their experience and expertise related to the co-regulation, positive youth development, and foster care. Expertise included:

- Serving as kinship, foster, and adoptive parents
- Understanding the needs of the youth through lived experience
- Building long-lasting relationships with youth in or transitioning out of foster care
- Translating science into practice
- Developing training/curricula for staff who work with youth

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- Researching the importance of caring adults in positive youth development
 - Understanding policies and procedures that support youth development
 - Working with underrepresented communities

Participants communicated the importance of the topics being discussed, most critically ensuring caring adults learn how to apply this knowledge to practice. Similar to the previous convening, participants also raised topics they hoped this work would address, including:

- Barriers and facilitators of co-regulation
- Caregivers' own needs for support
- How to leverage findings to inform prevention interventions and policies
- Approaches to building co-regulation into existing services and relationships

Initial Reflections on Findings from the Co-Regulation in Foster Care Project

After Child Trends presented key findings from the literature review and targeted program scan, participants reflected on how these findings align with current practice-based knowledge and research. A few key areas were highlighted in discussion:

- **Every day interactions are key to successful co-regulation.** To really make an impact, co-regulation strategies should be translated to new contexts within everyday interactions. For example, caring adults might use evidence-based kernels¹ of co-regulation to prepare youth for visits with non-custodial parents and support them after the visit.
- **Consistency among caring adults is important.** All caring adults in a young person's life should be familiar with the principles of co-regulation and use a shared language to maximize positive impact on youth.
- **Adult self-regulation is foundational for co-regulation.** Adults cannot co-regulate until they have developed their own self-regulation skills. Effective co-regulation may be especially difficult for adults in stressful situations.
- **Focusing on workforce wellness was recommended.** To support the co-regulation capacity of adults who work in youth-serving systems, including child welfare, workplaces should support staff wellness. Supervisors can model co-regulation by providing relational and self-care supports and skill-building for their staff. As adults experience the benefits of co-regulation in their professional lives, they may strengthen their co-regulation skills for interacting with youth.
- **Kinship caregivers lack resources for co-regulation.** Kinship caregivers may not regularly have access to many of the resources – both financial and relational – that other caregivers of youth in foster care are provided. This may be particularly true if the kinship arrangement is informal. As such, specific efforts to support co-regulation among this group are warranted.

¹ For more information on this term, see [Embry and Biglan \(2008\)](#).



Implications of Study Findings for Building Co-Regulation Capacity of the Child Welfare System

On the first day of the convening, participants broke into small groups to discuss implications of the findings from the literature review and program scan. The groups then reconvened and reported back on their discussions, addressing the following questions:


What skills and competencies should co-regulation focus on?

- **Broader and more foundational skills.** Future orientation and identity development were the most frequently addressed self-regulation skills in the literature. However, participants noted that more foundational skills (e.g., stress management and emotion regulation) are also critical for youth in developing and pursuing their goals. The child welfare system may focus on future orientation because older youth have limited time before they leave care, and transition to adulthood is an important goal. However, this focus may overlook opportunities for supporting youth with more foundational skills.
- **Skill development efforts should reflect youths' preferences and needs.** To effectively develop youths' foundational skills, caring adults need to consider their voice and experiences. Tuning in to the immediate concerns of young people strengthens relationships with youth. In addition, eliciting and honoring youth voice values and validates the possible selves² youth have envisioned. By starting with this vision of self, adults will be able to encourage a more complex skill of future orientation. This can also support youth as they work towards long-term goals.

Where are the opportunities for strengthening co-regulation?

- **Start by supporting the adults who work with youth.** A theme raised in response to this question was the idea of weaving co-regulation skills into a parallel process of supporting the adults who work with youth through supervision, professional development, etc. As discussed earlier, this will build adults' own self-regulation abilities as well as their co-regulation capacity.
- **Consider settings beyond child welfare.** Co-regulation can be brought into different places where youth with foster care experience interact with caring adults. Schools are a critical setting for co-regulation supports for youth in high school. Co-regulation is also well-aligned with the education system's increased focus on social emotional learning. Caring adults like coaches can also provide co-regulation during sports activities. Extra-curricular activities also provide opportunities for co-regulation support from peers.
- **Listen to how youth want to be supported.** Participants also discussed the need for adults to have open conversations with youth and engage them in co-creating supportive environments. This recommendation reflects the value of youth knowledge and perspectives and recognizes that adults don't always know best. Engaging with Youth Advisory Boards could also provide insight into system-level needs.

² This term has been used to refer to youth's imagined future selves. To learn more about the issues and topics related to this term, see work such as [Zhu et al., 2014](#).



What are existing opportunities for utilizing co-regulation within everyday interactions?

- **Opportunities are anywhere and everywhere.** Participants identified a long list of everyday opportunities for utilizing co-regulation. This could include times when adults and youth are preparing meals, driving, working on a budget, or at a sports team practice. One group noted that visitation with non-custodial parents was a specific opportunity where non-custodial parents could be trained and supported to provide co-regulation.
- **Embed co-regulation into the child welfare culture.** One way to embed co-regulation into interactions with youth is to promote it like a mindset or culture, especially within the work environments of child welfare staff. This parallel process approach would enable caring adults to understand what supportive environments look like and how to create these with youth.
- **Focus on small steps.** Caring adults can also recognize and celebrate small “relationship wins” with youth. Building trust and strengthening relationships with youth who have a history or disrupted relationships can take time, and caring adults will likely face challenges in creating these connections. By celebrating small steps or “wins”, caring adults can be reminded that progress is occurring.

Recommendations for Research and Practice that Promotes Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience

On the second day, participants again broke out into small groups to consider next steps for the co-regulation work. One group addressed research implications, one focused on practice, and one addressed both research and practice.

How should we disseminate co-regulation practice recommendations to foster parents, caseworkers, and other caring adults?

- **Affirm how co-regulation builds on what caring adults already do.** Avoid presenting co-regulation as another thing to be placed on the full plates of agency staff and caregivers who interact with youth. Instead, co-regulation should be presented as a way to strengthen what they are already doing through greater intentionality.
- **Use inclusive language.** Concerns were raised about how the word “regulation” can imply control or compliance. This frame may not resonate with some cultural groups like Indigenous people who have a more collective view of socialization. Instead, language could be considered that highlights the relational and connectedness aspects of co-regulation.
- **Describe instead of prescribe.** Co-regulation may resonate more with practitioners if it is communicated that there are numerous ways to provide co-regulation supports and that different youth have different co-regulation needs. Understanding the principles of co-regulation may help caring adults utilize strategies in a more flexible and effective way that meets youth where they are. This is particularly important for youth with disabilities, youth who identify as LGBTQ, and those with historically marginalized cultural identities.


- **Integrate co-regulation principles into shared language and reflection.** When caring adults reflect on how their current practices relate to co-regulation in discussion with other caring adults, this can help promote a shared understanding and language. Training workshops can promote the idea that co-regulation is a mindset about everyday interactions with youth and their environments.
- **Provide examples of actionable steps.** Instead of a checklist of items or a lengthy manual, provide examples of how caring adults can use co-regulation in everyday interactions.

How might we promote co-regulation approaches within child welfare agencies?

- **Align with trauma-informed care.** Participants discussed the importance of explicitly linking trauma informed care (TIC) and co-regulation. Describing the relationship between these two practices would help caregivers, agency staff, and other caring adults understand how co-regulation adds to instead of replaces work they are already doing. One description of how these approaches relate to each other is that TIC promotes healing, while co-regulation takes it a step further to promoting thriving.
- **Support adults working in youth-serving systems.** There was strong consensus that staff need support in using co-regulation. This is especially important because the child welfare workforce can experience vicarious trauma. Trainers and supervisors might implement a parallel support process through structured training and professional development around the principles of co-regulation. Trainings could also share evidence showing how self-regulation is influenced on a physiological level by stressful interactions with others, as well as by supportive relationships and interactions.
- **Focus on prevention.** When the child welfare system is focused on responding to crises, it may be difficult to invest in prevention approaches like co-regulation. As the emphasis on prevention increases, there may be more opportunities to promote co-regulation approaches.

How might we promote co-regulation as a framework for future research on supporting youth wellbeing?

- **Utilize traditional academic dissemination methods.** Peer reviewed publications and conference panels could be useful. One idea is to organize a special section at a conference and connect this to related ongoing work in the Healthy Marriage Relationship Education (HMRE) and Fatherhood fields. Bringing established child welfare researchers into conversation around co-regulation may also be valuable.
- **Focus on co-regulation as a mechanism of action.** Identifying how co-regulation may serve as a specific ecological protective factor may be a valuable approach for seeking federal funding. More specifically, there may be opportunities for secondary analysis of intervention approaches for youth who have experienced trauma that could be examined more specifically from a co-regulation framework.
- **Provide funding that supports holistic research.** A challenge for research in this area is that many questions and answers are best addressed from a broad perspective that includes mixed-methods work. Examining long-term outcomes in relation to co-regulation is also important, but



funding opportunities may not be readily available. However, such work could be highly valuable for practice and policy.

How can we support co-regulation work with special populations, including youth of color?

- **Utilize a holistic framework.** Participants suggested that co-regulation may be more inclusive when it utilizes a holistic framework that considers emotional, spiritual, and relational constructs like right relationships³, good boundaries, and trust.
- **Engage diverse communities.** To ensure that co-regulation approaches are relevant for all youth and families, research and practice around co-regulation needs to engage with the communities being served by child welfare agencies. One commonly utilized approach for doing this is Community Based Participatory Research, which could allow for “co-constructing” culturally relevant co-regulation approaches.

What else do we need to know from research?


- **Measures of co-regulation need to be developed.** To examine the effects of co-regulation strategies and approaches for future research, reliable and valid measures are needed. Observational measures may have value given the nature of co-regulation. Additionally, qualitative data may be helpful in capturing long-term, holistic outcomes related to relationship quality.

Prioritization of Report Recommendations for Next Steps

Participants ranked a list of recommendations identified in Child Trends’ report and discussed each one’s importance and feasibility. Highest ranked practice and research recommendations included:

- **Practice recommendations:**
 - ***Collaborate with youth*** to create opportunities to meaningfully incorporate their voice in decisions and promote their sense of agency.
 - ***Support youths’ connections with biological families and kin***, including supporting kinship care providers.
 - ***Support large-scale messaging*** promoting co-regulation within the child welfare system and across other systems.
 - ***Provide comprehensive co-regulation training*** for foster parents, birth parents, kinship care providers, caseworkers, and staff working in residential settings.
- **Research recommendations:**
 - ***Address the gaps in knowledge of co-regulation needs and strengths in co-regulation approaches*** for those who experience the greatest disparities within the child welfare system (Black Americans and American Indians/Alaskan Natives).

³ This term has been used to refer to relational, reciprocal, and respectful ways of interacting with nature including relationships with others. To learn more about the issues and topics related to this term, see work such as [Restoring Indigenous Systems of Relationality](#).

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- ***Include special populations in co-regulation research***, including youth with disabilities, those who identify as LGBTQ, and those who are parents.
 - ***Identify and evaluate the use of specific co-regulation strategies*** in day-to-day interactions, including peer mentoring.

Participants Identified Key Takeaways from the Convening

To wrap up the day, facilitators asked participants to share key takeaways they would have from the convening. Many of the broader themes discussed throughout the meeting were highlighted and are summarized here:

- **Incorporate youth voice at all levels.** A clear and strong theme was to actively engaging youth in identifying their co-regulation needs and preferences for support. This is important for targeting foundational skills that individual youth find relevant. Involving them in co-creating supportive environments may help promote their sense of agency. Opportunities for doing this include partnering with Youth Advisory Boards within the child welfare system to identify system-level supports to improve practice on the individual-level.
- **Build adult capacity for providing co-regulation.** Staff who work directly with youth and families within the child welfare system and other youth –serving agencies have tremendous demands placed on them. Workplaces should prioritize staff wellness to strengthen staff abilities to provide co-regulation for youth. Reflective supervision and professional development can model co-regulation, enabling caring adults to experience its benefits. Ideally, co-regulation would be embedded as a mindset or culture into the child welfare system.
- **Identify and communicate actionable day-to-day co-regulation strategies and supports.** Caring adults may become more intentional in their interactions with youth if they are provided with specific examples of co-regulation. It may also be helpful to connect co-regulation to adults' existing practices.