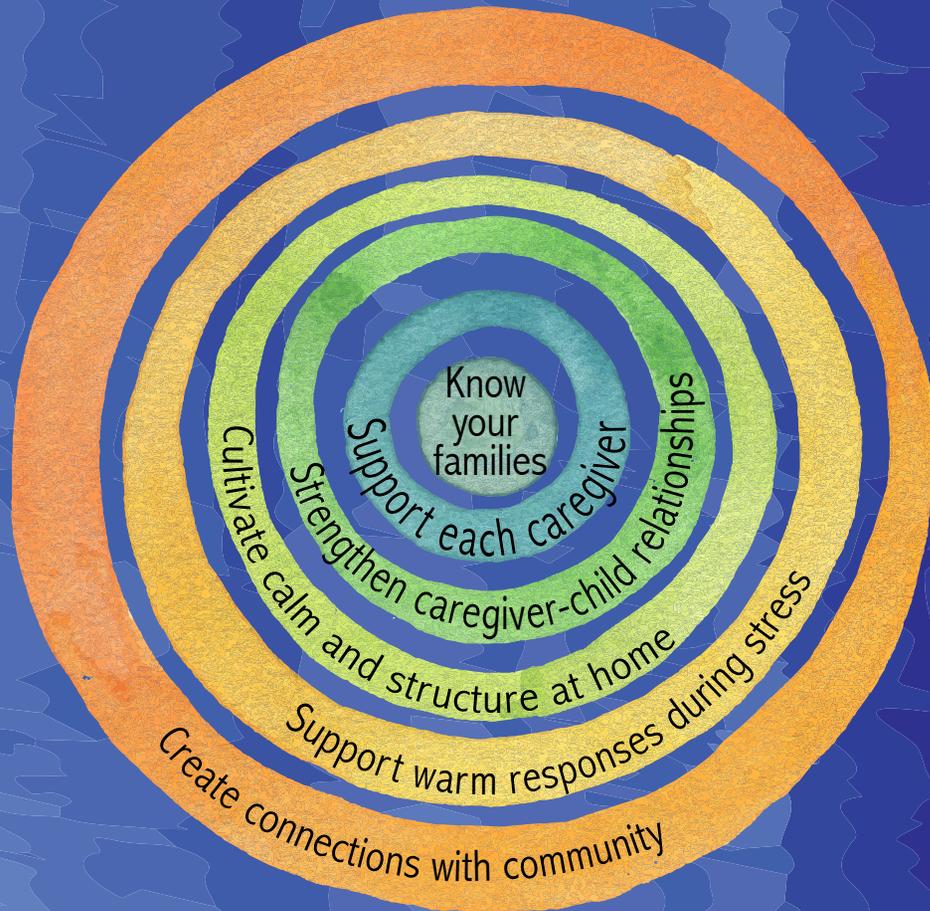


Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation in Young Children



Tips for Practitioners Working with Families in Home Settings



Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers (birth-5 years old)

The home environment, including a child's relationship with their parents and primary caregivers, is the biggest influence on a child's ability to develop self-regulation skills. Home visiting professionals have a unique opportunity to help both the child and parent or caregiver develop self-regulation skills and to strengthen their relationship. Some families in home visiting programs may be experiencing economic strain and other adversity and may need extra help to manage stress. Home visitors may also need to work with mental health services or other support programs to assist parents and caregivers with specific challenges, such as coping with depression or managing a child's challenging behaviors. This document provides tips to help home visitors empower caregivers with skills and tools to provide co-regulation support for their child. The term 'caregiver' is used throughout the tip sheet to include parents and/or any adult with a primary caregiving role in the child's life. Program administrators may also wish to view practice briefs that describe [self-regulation development in early childhood](#) and [co-regulation from birth to young adulthood](#) in more detail.

In addition, snapshots that summarize key self-regulation concepts and interventions in [infants and toddlers](#) and in [preschoolers](#) may be helpful for home visiting practitioners.

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions. The development of self-regulation begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

6 Co-regulation Tips for Home Visitors Working with Families with Small Children

1 Establish a strong relationship with each family. Engaging with caregivers and earning their trust will help you have a positive influence on the family and work with them in ways that builds upon their unique strengths.

2 Help caregivers build their own self-regulation capacity. Caregivers may need to strengthen their own self-regulation skills to better support the children.

3 Strengthen and support the caregiver-child relationship. Secure relationships with parents and caregivers are the bedrock of self-regulation development in children.

4 Work with caregivers to cultivate calm and structured home environments that support child development. Positive routines and a warm home climate can help prevent and buffer stressful experiences.

5 Help caregivers learn how to respond with both warmth and structure during stressful moments. Being warm and responsive when a child is upset and unable to regulate their own emotions is a central feature of co-regulation by caregivers. Caregivers can also help children learn important self-regulation skills that will help them during times of stress.

6 Provide opportunities for families to build social support connections. The caregivers and children benefit from social support networks and positive relationships with peers in their community.

Co-regulation is the warm, responsive interactions and support, structure, coaching and modeling provided by caregivers to foster self-regulation development in children.

**Support
Self-Regulation
Skills**

**Build Warm,
Responsive
Relationship**

**Structure
the Environment**

Home visiting work can be stressful. Remember to start with you.

Tend to your own physical and emotional health to enhance your well-being and minimize the effects of stress.

You can model and coach self-care and stress-management practices for the caregivers and children.

- Regular exercise, adequate sleep, and nutritious eating habits can boost your energy and resilience.
- Spend quality time with family and friends, and talk to them about the demands and the joys of your work so they can provide emotional support.
- Learn to recognize and manage your own stresses. When you feel overwhelmed, have compassion toward yourself and use calming techniques such as deep breathing. Simple mind-body activities, such as yoga, [relaxation](#), and [mindfulness](#) practices can boost health and relieve stress.

Home visitors can use the tips provided within this document to help caregivers support the specific self-regulation skills their child is developing.

From basic self-soothing in infants to increasing ability among preschoolers to self-adjust behavior, each age range is marked by development of unique self-regulation skills.

In infancy, basic self-regulation skills allow a baby find comfort when they feel overwhelmed or upset. Infants can self-soothe by sucking on their fingers or a pacifier, and avert their gaze and attention away from upsetting situations and toward sources of comfort.

Toddlers can use self-regulation skills to begin to manage their behaviors. This may include the ability to focus and wait for brief periods, adjust behavior to reach goals, and learn to use simple words to tell others how they feel and to ask adults for help.

Preschoolers have a growing range of self-regulation skills that can be expanded with coaching and instruction from adults. Preschoolers can begin to understand perspectives of others, control impulses more often, follow rules and work toward goals, and learn to use language and actions to calm down and solve simple problems.

Even as self-regulation skills continue to grow, it is important to remember that all young children need external structure and support to control their impulses and manage strong emotions.

Each of the 6 tips for co-regulation is detailed in the pages that follow.

Self-regulation development begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

Co-regulation from caregivers is important for optimal self-regulation development.

1

Establish a strong relationship with each family.

Take time to understand the family's culture and the caregivers' goals for the child and incorporate their values and preferences into your work with them.

Listen openly to the caregivers' concerns, and work collaboratively to address them. Start with the caregivers' needs and ideas, and together identify approaches to address their concerns.

Empower caregivers and help build their sense of competence by identifying their strengths, recognizing their efforts, and providing encouragement.

Use **Family Engagement tools** and **Reflective Strategies** to help you build strong relationships with each of your families.

2

Help caregivers build their own self-regulation capacity.

Help caregivers understand that strengthening their own self-regulation skills will have positive benefits on their children's self-regulation development. Share with them the [benefits of mindfulness practices](#) for their own well-being as well as the caregiver-child relationship.

Work with caregivers to identify sources of stress and ways to lessen the impact of stress on themselves and their children as much as possible. Talk through life's day-to-day challenges and help them come up with solutions to reduce the stressors when possible. Connect them with local services and supports as needed.

Coach caregivers on how to identify and manage their own emotions during stressful situations. For example, they might take their own "time out" to calm down or talk with a friend about solutions before acting to address a problem. This will enable them to respond to their children in a more positive and thoughtful way and will model self-regulation strategies.

Pay attention to the possibility of underlying mental health issues, such as depression or substance misuse, which are common responses to ongoing stress and adversity. Provide emotional support for the caregivers, and connect them with [mental health resources](#) and local services when needed.

Address possible risk factors and build protective factors for child maltreatment or neglect. Understand the various [factors that may increase the chances for child abuse and neglect, and promote protective factors](#). If you have specific concerns, use available tools to [prevent](#) or [respond](#) if necessary.

Support and strengthen the caregiver-child relationship.

Help caregivers understand that having a [warm and responsive relationship](#) with their child is the most important part of the child's environment that shapes brain development, and is the cornerstone of effective co-regulation.

Help caregivers appreciate their child's unique personality, and assist them in identifying, understanding, and responding to their child's cues and behaviors. This [Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(SEFEL\) guide](#) can help caregivers learn what to expect and how to understand behaviors in children from birth to age 2. This [temperament assessment tool](#) may help you and the caregiver support their child's unique traits.

Guide caregivers in providing warm and responsive care using daily caregiving routines, such as feeding, diapering, and bathing. Predictable and sensitive care will help establish trust and a positive connection between the caregiver and child.

Engage caregivers in playful interactions with their children using simple materials in the home and during normal daily routines. Model warm and responsive play when you interact with their child.



4

Help caregivers cultivate calm and structured home environments.

Help parents and caregivers understand how a child's environment and experiences can influence behavior. When children experience more stress than they can handle, this may lead to "acting out" behaviors, signaling that they feel overwhelmed and need support. Parents and caregivers can prevent some problem behaviors by buffering key stressors through warm, responsive relationships and consistent, positive routines and structure.

Work with caregivers to establish family rituals and routines that facilitate positive interactions with the child. Help the caregivers understand how routines and structure help children feel calm and safe and can provide a sense of security during stressful moments.

Support basic parenting skills development to enhance the safety and wellbeing of the child and to boost the caregivers' self-confidence. See this [example 7-step format](#) for coaching caregivers in a way that is supportive and non-critical

Coach the caregivers in positive, responsive parenting. Encourage and reinforce caregivers' sensitivity and responsiveness to their child's behavior, and model positive behavior management in your interactions with the child.

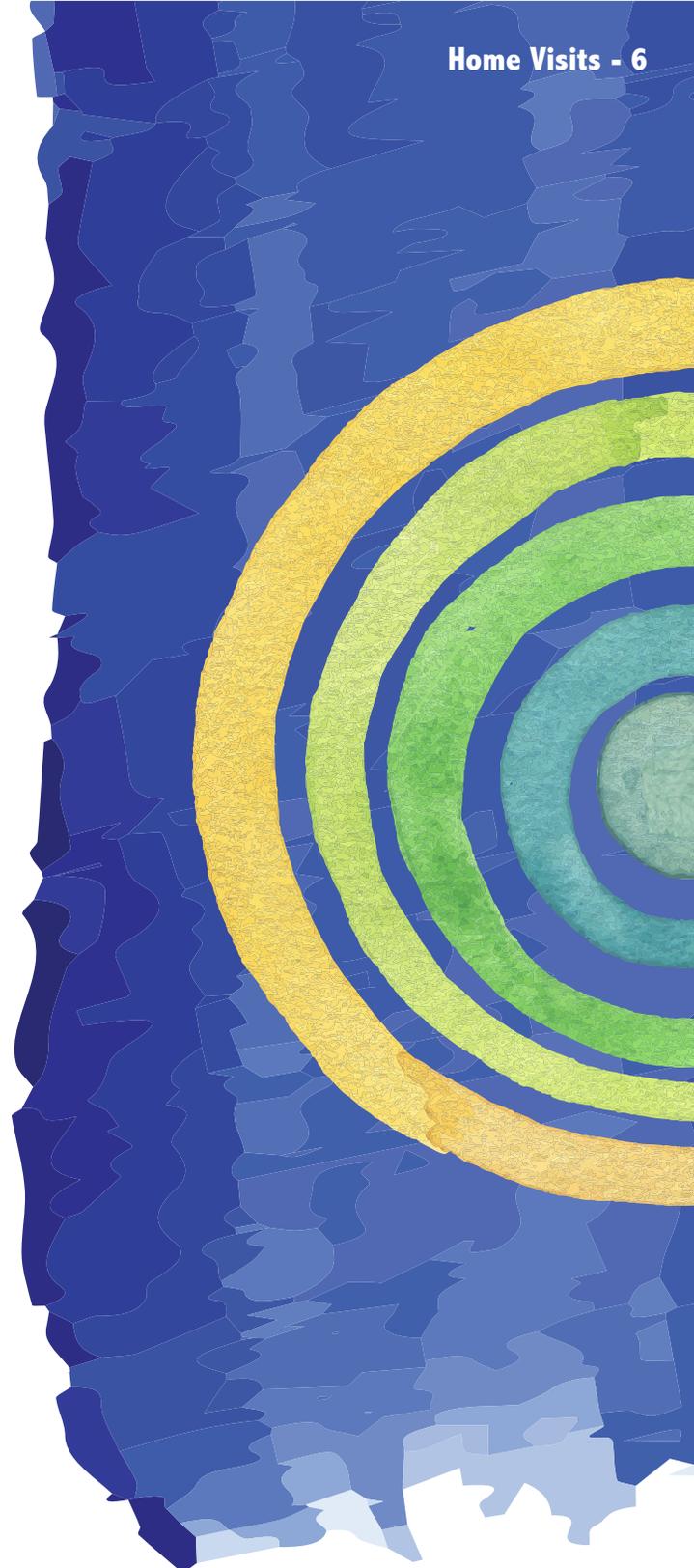
5

Help caregivers learn how to respond with both warmth and structure during stressful moments.

Help caregivers practice positive discipline and maintain a warm relationship while setting limits. For children of all ages, caregivers should remain calm during stressful moments and while enforcing rules. For children who are preschool-aged and older, brief and logical consequences will help encourage positive behavior, especially when this is done in the context of a positive relationship with the child. Providing consistent structure and calmness will help children continuously improve their self-regulation abilities.

Help caregivers work with their children during calm moments to develop self-regulation skills that they can use when they experience upsetting situations. For example, the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (SEFEL) initiative provides [activities](#), [scripted stories](#) and a [caregiver's guide](#) that can help a child learn positive behaviors and how to react calmly when upset.

Provide tools caregivers can use to address challenging behaviors in preschool-aged children. These [teaching tools](#) and [behavior management tools](#) provide ready-to-use ideas and materials to help young children with challenging behavior.



Support positive family relationships and community connections.

Model respect and compassion in your relationships with the children, the caregivers, and with other adults. Help the caregivers understand that their relationships with other individuals provide an example that will influence how children learn to interact with others.

If there are multiple children in the family, help the caregivers identify strategies to support positive sibling relationships. For example, spending quality one-on-one time with each child for even 15 minutes a day can reduce sibling competition for attention. Caregivers can also mediate sibling conflicts to help the children understand each other's perspectives and learn social problem-solving skills.

Consider group sessions that bring together mothers, fathers, co-parents, or other caregivers to encourage families to connect as a community. Use these sessions to help all caregivers understand the importance of their relationships with the child and to share co-regulation approaches.

Take advantage of opportunities to support relationship-building with others in the community. Socializing with other families can strengthen relationships within and between families. For preschoolers, play groups or outings can support development of relationships with peers and other adults. Group activities can also help caregivers establish supportive relationships with other parents and caregivers.

Help caregivers talk to their preschool aged and older children about how to be a good friend to their peers. For one example, see the "I Can Be a Super Friend" story from [SEFEL's Scripted Stories for Social Situations](#).

6



Additional web-based resources

The following websites contain additional tools to support social and emotional and self-regulation development in young children, including many of the links embedded within the tips above. These links are intended to provide further examples and represent a small selection of the many resources that are available to practitioners.

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#)

[Maryland Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(SEFEL\)](#)

[National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)

[Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)

[Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts: Serve and Return, Building Adult Capabilities, Ready4Routines](#)

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#)

[Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems](#)

[Home Visitor's Handbook](#)

[Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)

[Integrated Stage-Based Framework for Implementation of Early Childhood Programs and Systems](#)

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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Inclusion of links to other web-based resources throughout this document does not imply endorsement.

This is one of four early childhood practitioner tip sheets. Much of the content is based on the reports and briefs in the [Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series](#) prepared for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) by the Duke Center for Family Policy and the UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.

