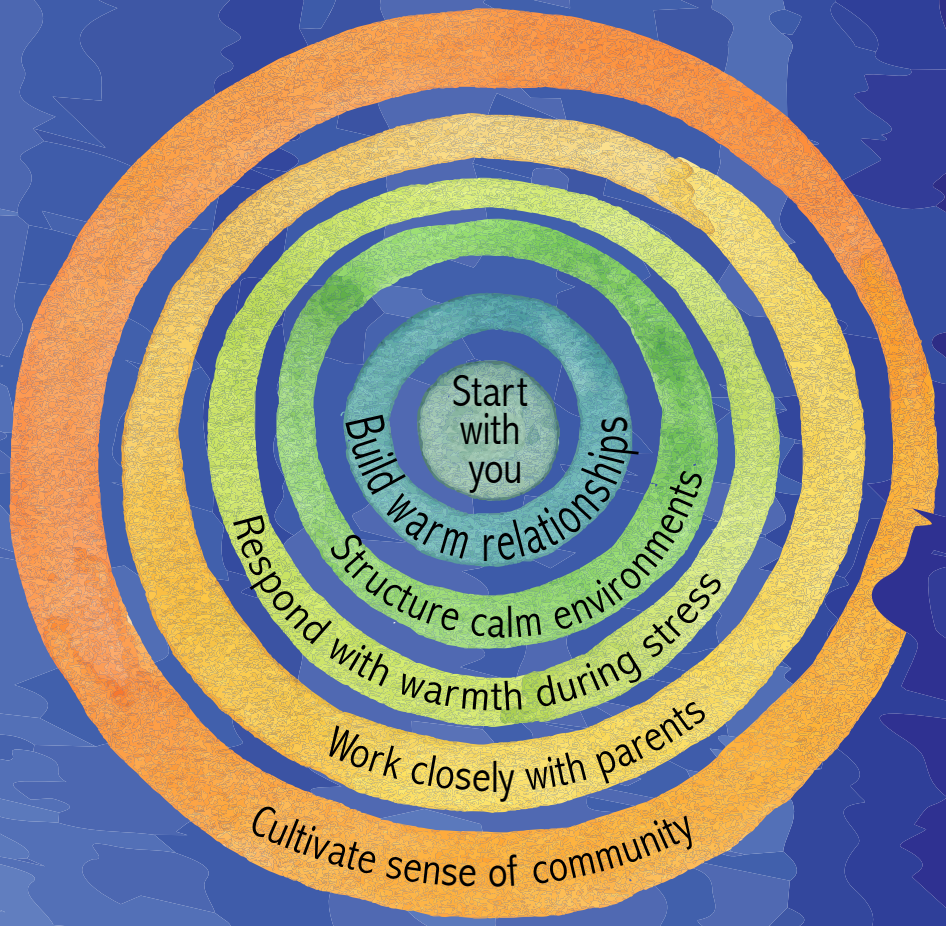
Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation in Young Children



Tips for Practitioners Working with Infants in Classroom Settings

Infants (birth to 1 year old)

The first year of life is a critical time for infants to begin developing secure attachments with their parents and caregivers (secure attachment is when children know they can depend on adults to respond sensitively to their needs). This helps babies learn that their world is a safe place and it is an important foundation for self-regulation development. When babies transition to childcare outside of the home, they need to form relationships with other caregivers and learn through experience that their needs will be met. Infants are sensitive to the emotions of adults and rely on caregivers to provide a calm and soothing presence, particularly during times of transition or distress. Infants can utilize simple self-regulation skills such as self-soothing or turning their attention away from upsetting situations, usually toward their caregiver, to seek comfort. This document provides tips to help caregivers use co-regulation to support early development of self-regulation skills in infants. Program administrators may 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, this snapshot summarizes key self-regulation concepts and interventions, and may be helpful for practitioners working with infants.

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.

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6 Co-regulation Tips for Working with Infants

1 2 3 4 5 6

Start with you. We all feel stressed at times, and caregiving can be demanding. Practice self-care and effective stress management to enhance your own well-being and resilience in the classroom.

Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each baby. Optimal self-regulation development in children occurs in the context of positive relationships. Develop a warm relationship with every child to create a strong and essential foundation for your co-regulation practices.

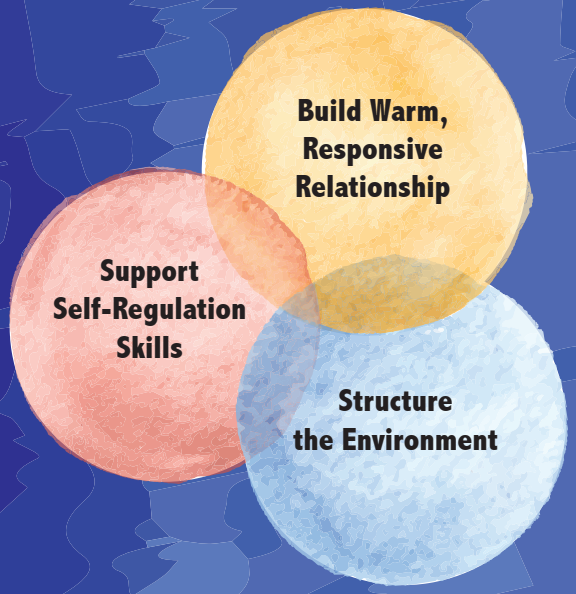
Create calm and structured childcare environments. Infants will experience moments of distress in any normal day. You can prevent and buffer some of this by creating calm, soothing, and homelike environments.

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments. Infants need the most co-regulation support when they are upset and unable to regulate their own emotions. You can promote self-regulation development by being warm and responsive and providing physical comfort to help babies calm down.

Work closely with parents. Self-regulation development is influenced by home and child-care environments. Engage with parents to learn about their efforts at home and to support self-regulation development across settings.

Cultivate a sense of community. Social environments can shape individual behaviors and relationships. Facilitate early social engagement and allow babies the opportunity to feel connected with each other to support healthy social and emotional development and to lay groundwork for future peer relationships.

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



Self-regulation development

begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

Co-regulation from caregivers

is important for optimal self-regulation development.

Caregivers can use the tips provided within this document to support the specific self-regulation skills developing at each age.

Infants

In infancy, basic self-regulation skills allow a baby find comfort when they feel overwhelmed or upset. For example, infants can:

- self-soothe by sucking on their fingers or a pacifier
- avert their gaze and attention away from upsetting situations and toward sources of comfort

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

1 Start with you.

Learn to recognize and manage your own stresses. See also these Taking Care of Ourselves guides for suggestions.

Take advantage of available support services to understand how your own feelings, experiences, and well-being influence your interactions with infants and their families.

Add mind-body activities to your daily routines. Simple activities, such as mindful breathing or yoga, can have big benefits.

Practice keeping your mind in the present moment when caring for infants to help yourself and the baby feel at ease. Whether feeding, changing a diaper, or consoling a crying baby, keep your thoughts focused on the baby. You can also count your own breaths or movements and notice your sensations to help your mind stay present and calm.

2 Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each baby.

Use child-centered caregiving practices that build connections.

Respond warmly to a baby's cues with eye contact, reassuring words, or with physical affection to support development of social and emotional skills and build strong relationships.

Use play to strengthen your relationship with the infants.

To learn more about the benefits of responding sensitively and consistently to an infant's cues and gestures, see this overview of the Serve and Return concept.

Create calm and structured childcare environments.

Set up the childcare room in ways that reduce frustration or overstimulation and that provide a "home away from home" feeling. For example, separate quiet and noisy areas and use natural light and cozy furniture and décor.

Create predictable schedules and routines to give the babies a sense of calm and security.

Anticipate babies' physical and emotional needs and attend to them before the infant gets frustrated.

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments.

When a baby becomes upset, respond quickly with reassuring words and physical affection.

Remove the baby from stressful situations to a quiet area and continue to give reassurance and comfort until he or she is calm.

Remember to treat yourself with kindness and empathy during stressful moments. Being aware of any unpleasant feelings that these moments bring about will make it easier to respond with empathy toward yourself and toward the baby.

5 Work closely with parents.

Talk with parents about the importance of warm, responsive parenting for helping their infant regulate emotions and behaviors. Ask parents about strategies and routines that work at home, and offer ideas and explain the approaches you use with their baby.

Create regular opportunities for parents and teachers to share experiences and perspectives. Ongoing dialogue with parents around common goals for the child will help you understand parents' perspectives so you can work together for the infant's benefit.

Children and families living in stressful conditions may need extra support from home visiting or mental health services. Stay up-to-date on resources that are available to help you support them. Links to a few resources are provided at the end of this document.

Cultivate a sense of community.

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Create a caring childcare environment that reinforces a strong sense of community. Sing songs together or create special rituals that help the babies feel connected with each other and the childcare environment.

Show warmth and kindness toward each infant to send a positive caregiving message to other babies and adults in the room. For example, talk about how and why you might respond to a crying baby: "Baby Jane is crying. Maybe she is hungry or has a wet diaper. I am going to check and see if I can help her feel better."

Create opportunities to allow babies to see and hear each other to support their future interaction and play. Put them near each other where they can make eye contact, babble back and forth, and share engagement with the same objects.

Model respect and compassion in your relationships with other adults so infants can sense the positive emotions and can see examples of caring relationships.

Additional web-based resources

The following websites contain additional tools to support self-regulation development in 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
Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement
Integrated Stage-Based Framework for Implementation of Early Childhood Programs and Systems

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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 (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports) 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.