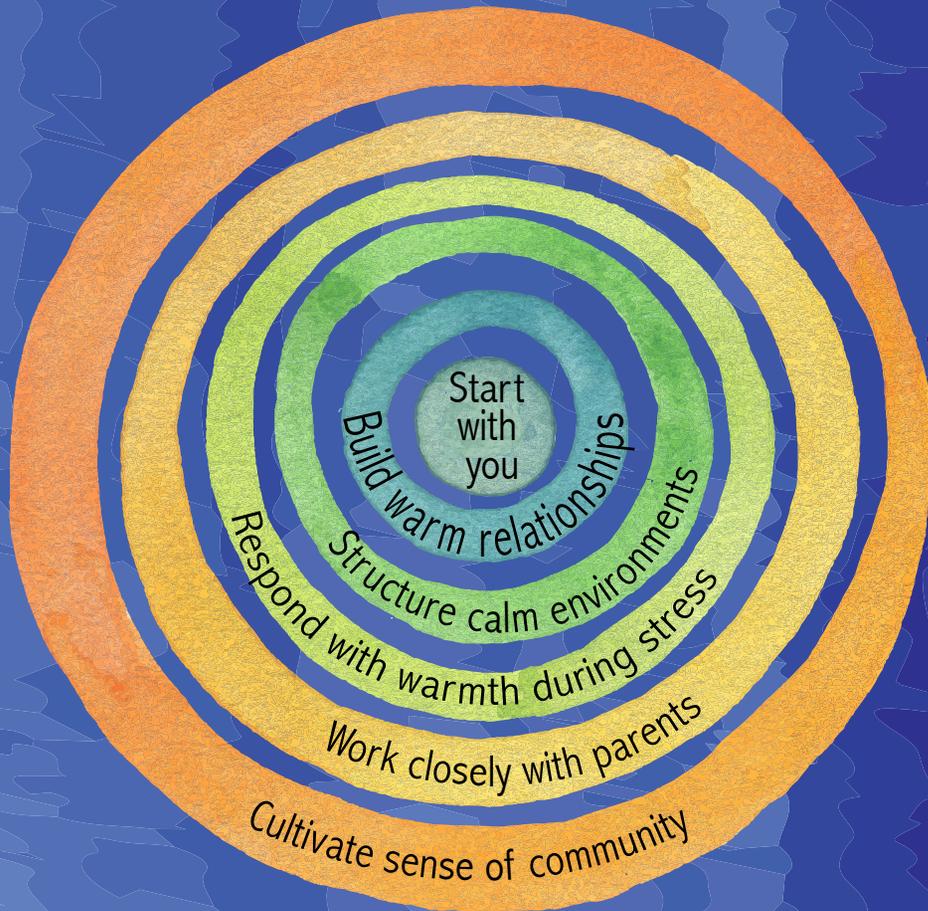


Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation in Young Children



Tips for Practitioners Working with Preschool Children in Classroom Settings



Preschoolers (3-5 years old)

The preschool period in a child's life is full of new experiences, new expectations, and new opportunities to build relationships. Children in this age group have great potential to develop their self-regulation skills with specific instruction, support, and scaffolding from caring adults. They can focus their attention on short, simple tasks, and become better able to control impulses and wait for longer periods. Their actions become shaped more by rules and goals and they are better able to understand other perspectives (a key component of empathy). Their increasing language skills help them to calm down and solve problems. However, emotions are still powerful drivers of behavior at this age and children need significant external structure and reinforcement to manage strong feelings and follow rules and directions. Positive relationships with caregivers are essential for cultivating preschoolers' expanding skillsets. This document provides tips to help caregivers use co-regulation to promote self-regulation skill development in preschoolers.

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 preschoolers.

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 Working with Preschoolers

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 child.

Children learn to manage their emotions and behaviors better when they feel a positive connection with their teacher. 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.

Preschoolers will experience moments of distress and conflict in any normal day. You can prevent and buffer some of this by creating a classroom environment that is predictable, fair, and positive.

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments and teach children how to solve problems. Children need the most co-regulation support when they are upset and unable to manage their own emotions. Use your positive relationships with the children to give comfort and support practice of calm-down skills and problem-solving.

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

Cultivate a sense of community and friendship in the classroom. Positive peer relationships and social environments help children do better socially, emotionally, and academically. There are many ways you can encourage these relationships and a sense of community in the classroom.

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**

**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.***

Preschoolers

Preschoolers have a growing range of skills that support their ability to self-regulate. For example, preschoolers can:

- focus their attention and wait for longer periods
- identify and express feelings and understand perspectives of others
- control impulses more often, follow rules, and work toward goals
- learn to use language and behaviors to calm down and solve simple problems
- expand self-regulation abilities with coaching and instruction from adults

Although self-regulation skills are growing, it is important to remember that preschoolers need significant external structure and reinforcement to help them regulate their feelings and behaviors.

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 these [Taking Care of Ourselves](#) guides for examples of effective self-care strategies.

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. The Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (SEFEL) initiative provides [relaxation techniques](#) designed for children that may also be helpful for adults.

Show the children what you do to calm down when you feel stressed or upset by describing your specific feelings and actions. For example, “I feel upset right now. I am going to take deep breaths to calm down.”

2

Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each child.

Take small steps each day to build a bond with each child.

Learn about each child’s personality and interests and take those into consideration when engaging them in classroom activities. Show them you notice and care about who they are and how they feel.

Use child-centered and play-based teaching practices that involve giving positive attention and making descriptive comments while letting a child take the lead. Play can help support warm relationships and it also promotes learning and self-regulation development. [This video](#) provides an overview of the benefits of play in early childhood and ways to use play in the classroom, and [this one](#) provides guidance on how to engage children in mature play to facilitate self-regulation development.

Create calm and structured childcare environments.

Set up the classroom in ways that invite positive interactions, reduce stress and frustration, and provide a “home away from home” feeling. For example, create a “cozy corner” or calm down area, provide multiple copies of the same toys and books to reduce conflict, and ensure there is plenty of space for activities. Use natural light and cozy furniture and décor. See these [Tips for Teachers](#) for more suggestions.

Create predictable schedules and routines to give children a sense of security and so they know what to expect throughout the day. Display pictures that convey the day’s activities. See these [Tips for Teachers](#) for more suggestions.

Establish simple classroom rules and teach them through repeated practice and by emphasizing appropriate behaviors (e.g., “Use gentle hands”). Prompt children to identify the rules, show them what following the rule looks like, and offer specific praise when they follow them. See this [Tool for Teachers](#) for one example of how to create and display classroom rules.

Review behavioral expectations and rules regularly, especially during transitions or choice time, and remember that learning to follow rules takes practice. See these tips for setting [behavioral expectations](#) and [managing transitions](#).

Learn and anticipate children’s unique needs and areas for development, and find ways to provide targeted support to help each child gain the needed skills.

Notice individual personalities and behaviors, and **help prevent or resolve** peer conflicts by structuring the environment in a way that maximizes positive engagement and minimizes behavior problems. When conflicts do occur, suggest solutions, coach problem-solving, and provide support.

Help children develop and practice social and emotional skills. See these [practical strategies](#) that can be readily implemented in classroom settings.



4

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments and teach children how to solve problems.

Redirect children's attention or actions away from challenging behaviors and help them make positive choices. See these [tips](#) for ways you can redirect challenging behavior.

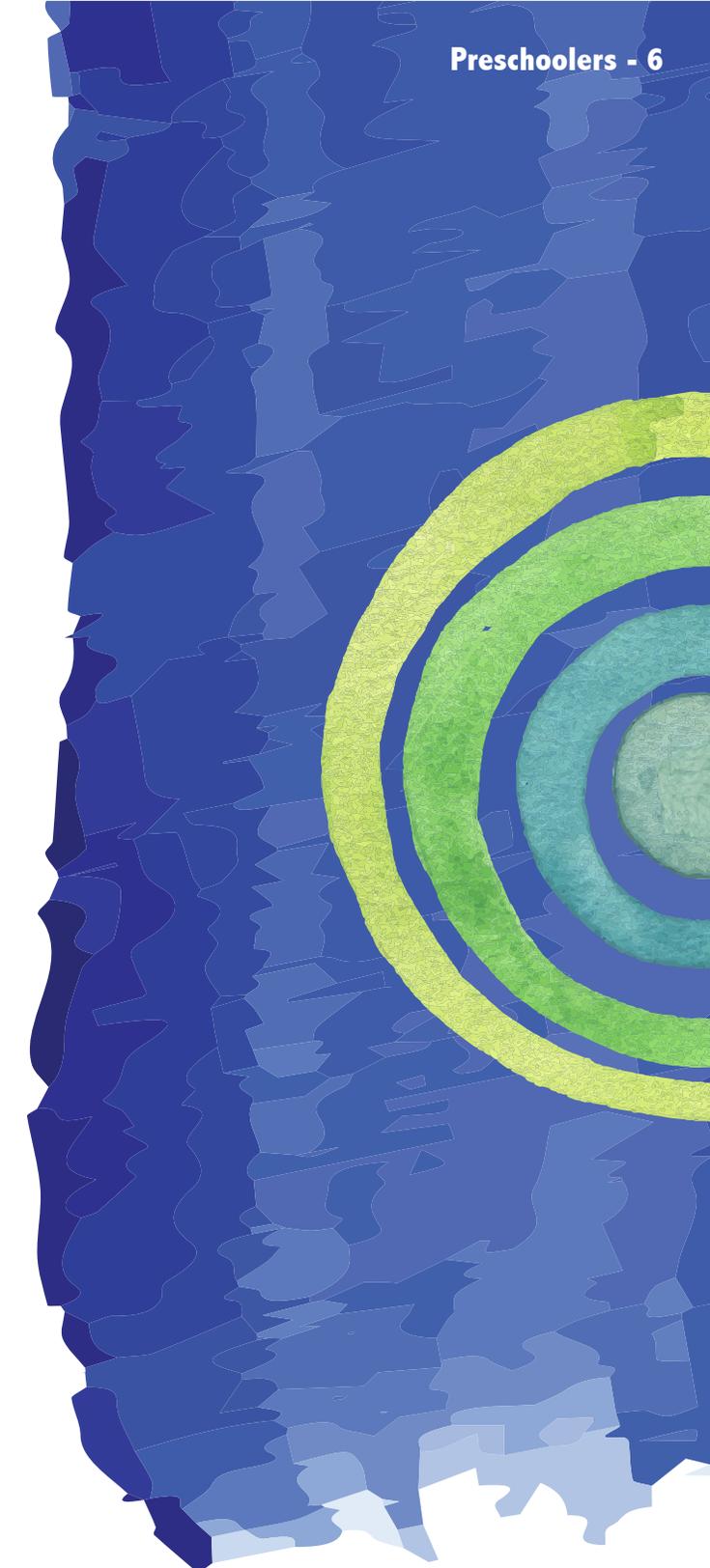
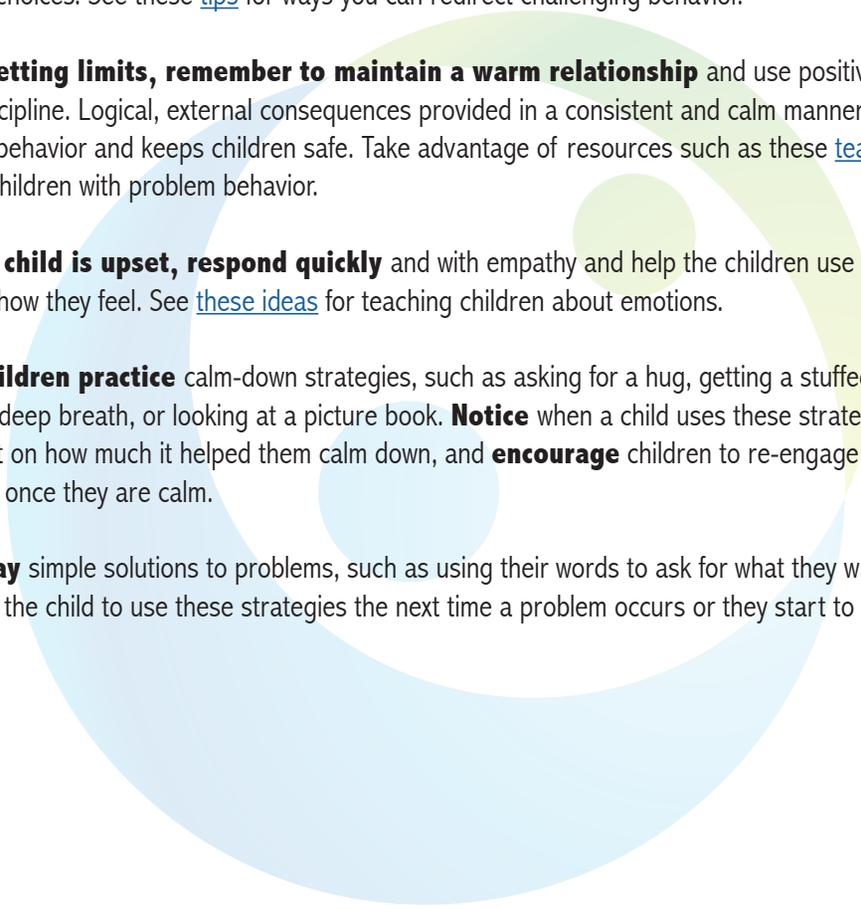
When setting limits, remember to maintain a warm relationship and use positive approaches to discipline. Logical, external consequences provided in a consistent and calm manner encourages positive behavior and keeps children safe. Take advantage of resources such as these [teaching tools](#) to help children with problem behavior.

When a child is upset, respond quickly and with empathy and help the children use words to express how they feel. See [these ideas](#) for teaching children about emotions.

Help children practice calm-down strategies, such as asking for a hug, getting a stuffed animal, taking a deep breath, or looking at a picture book. **Notice** when a child uses these strategies and comment on how much it helped them calm down, and **encourage** children to re-engage in positive activities once they are calm.

Role play simple solutions to problems, such as using their words to ask for what they want.

Prompt the child to use these strategies the next time a problem occurs or they start to get upset.



Work closely with parents.

Create regular opportunities for parents and teachers to share experiences and to work together to help children develop their self-regulation skills.

Talk with parents about how much warm, responsive parenting can help their child regulate emotions and behaviors. Ask parents about strategies and routines that work at home, offer ideas, and explain the approaches you use with their child, including ways the parents can incorporate similar coaching strategies at home.

Focus on the common goals you and the parents share for the child. Ongoing, two-way communication and understanding parents' perspectives will help you work together for the child's benefit.

Children and families living in stressful conditions may need extra support from home visiting or mental health services. Be familiar with program supports and other 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.

Create a caring classroom environment that reinforces a strong sense of community. For example, sing songs together or create special rituals that help the children feel connected with each other and the classroom. See these [teacher tips](#) for other ways you can create a caring community.

Show kindness toward each child and model generosity in your relationships with other adults. [Provide positive encouragement](#) to individual children so that the other children notice and learn to give compliments to each other.

Promote respect and cooperation through play and structured group activities. For example, encourage children to build structures together, or stimulate group problem-solving by asking questions and validating each child's idea.

Create rules and expectations that support friendship and respect. Teach children how to be a good friend (e.g., see "I Can Be a Super Friend" from [SEFEL's Scripted Stories for Social Situations](#)), and how to come up with constructive solutions to common conflicts. Notice and praise positive interactions such as sharing, helping, and taking turns.

Learn how to prevent, identify, and respond to early bullying behaviors. See this [Eyes on Bullying](#) toolkit for early childhood educators for examples.





Additional web-based resources

The following websites contain additional tools to support social and emotional 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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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.

