

Science briefing Managing big feelings together

The Centre for Early Childhood's Explainer on managing big feelings describes the value of adults supporting babies and young children in managing big emotions.

This briefing summarises the science behind this animation.

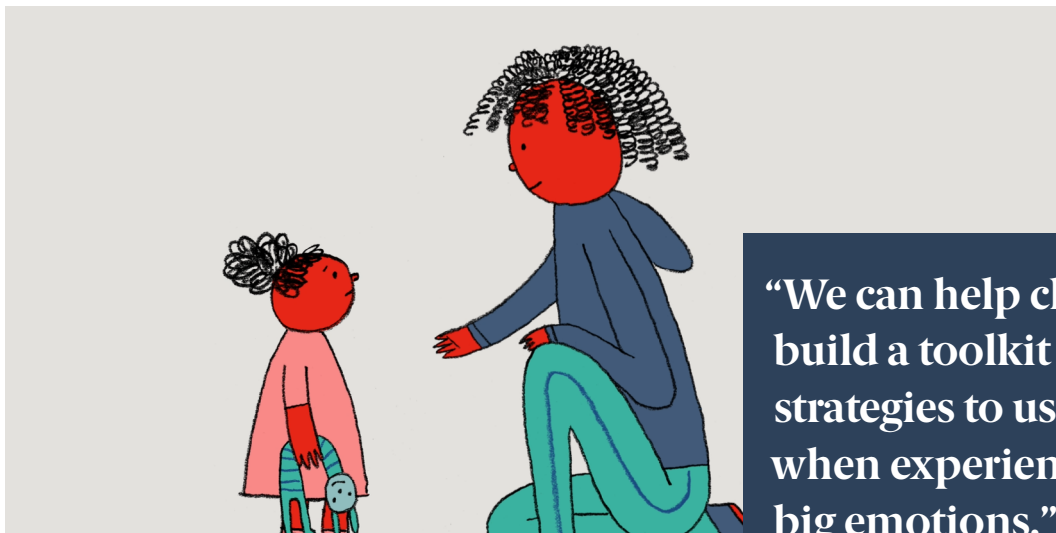


Watch the Explainer Series on the
Centre for Early Childhood website
[centreforearlychildhood.org/
the-explainer-series/](https://centreforearlychildhood.org/the-explainer-series/)

Co-regulation unpacked

1. Co-regulation involves supporting another person when managing big feelings and returning to a state of calm. When adults co-regulate children, they help a child deal with positive or negative feelings that might otherwise be overwhelming. This enables the child to return to a state where they can think clearly, feel safe and respond to the world around them in helpful ways. We all function best when we're not too revved up or too shut down, but somewhere in the middle¹.

2. The nature of co-regulation will change as children grow². Co-regulation means changing the child's environment, attending to their needs, and helping them to manage emotions³. For example, if a baby is crying because they are hungry, a parent might simultaneously feed them and gently rock them. If a toddler is over-excited at a party, a parent might notice and gently guide them to a quieter space. By being a calm presence, the parent can help the toddler return to a calmer state.
3. As children develop they gradually need less external support to manage emotions. Over time, they become more capable of self-regulation. That said, even adults sometimes benefit from support during periods of distress or overwhelm.
4. Co-regulation is not about denying or hiding emotions. Adults might let a child know that it is okay to be sad, scared, angry, or excited, and that the feeling will not last forever. We can help children build a toolkit of strategies to use when experiencing big emotions.



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5. Co-regulation is linked to other concepts in the Explainer series, such as attunement, contingent responsiveness, pacing, and scaffolding. When an adult co-regulates a child, they are attuned to the child's emotions and respond contingently. As young children become capable of managing their emotions adults can gradually adjust their support, changing the pace of their response, and providing space and scaffolding as needed. For example, a parent may pause briefly when a baby fusses, to see if the baby regulates themselves by finding a hand to suck – and only pick the baby up if they cannot calm themselves⁴. This short pause can give the baby the chance to develop and use their own emotional regulation skills. Importantly, this is not the same as leaving a baby to cry for long periods, which is not good for a child's emotional health.

Co-regulation is harder if adults experience stress and adversity

The Explainer on co-regulation describes how adults need to regulate their own emotions before attending to their child. This is like fitting our own oxygen masks on a plane before helping others.

Co-regulation is linked to adults' emotional skills and wellbeing, and their current levels of stress. An adult who themselves is overwhelmed may not have the capacity to provide the emotional support their child needs.

Adults are better able to co-regulate a child if they have capacities such as reflective functioning: this is the ability to understand our own and other people's thoughts and feelings, and behaviours rooted in those mental states⁵. Reflective function can be compromised when adults did not experience sensitive, responsive care in their own childhoods^{6,7}.

Co-regulation supports social and emotional development

All babies need co-regulation

From birth, babies display distress when they are hungry, scared, uncomfortable, cold or wet. During their earliest months, they are incapable of managing these feelings by themselves. They need caregivers both to meet their physical needs and to help them recover from distress⁸.

Young babies cannot distinguish between discomfort and danger. For a tiny baby who is totally dependent on adults for survival, not being fed or comforted may feel life-threatening. Because they are entirely dependent on adults, babies are biologically programmed to express distress, generally through crying, to ensure their needs are met.

All babies are dependent on caregivers to help them regulate and manage big feelings,



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but there can be individual differences in how babies deal with distress and discomfort. Some babies might be soothed easily with a gentle shush and develop ways of soothing themselves (such as sucking hands) early in life⁹. Others might need to be picked up, cuddled and rocked, and may take time to calm down, even when supported by the most sensitive caregivers. This is nothing to worry about as all babies are different.



Managing our emotions

The ability to recognise, understand and manage feelings develops through the first years of life¹⁰. Through repeated experiences of co-regulation, children develop the capacities to regulate their own emotions themselves^{11,12,13}.

Nurturing our relationships

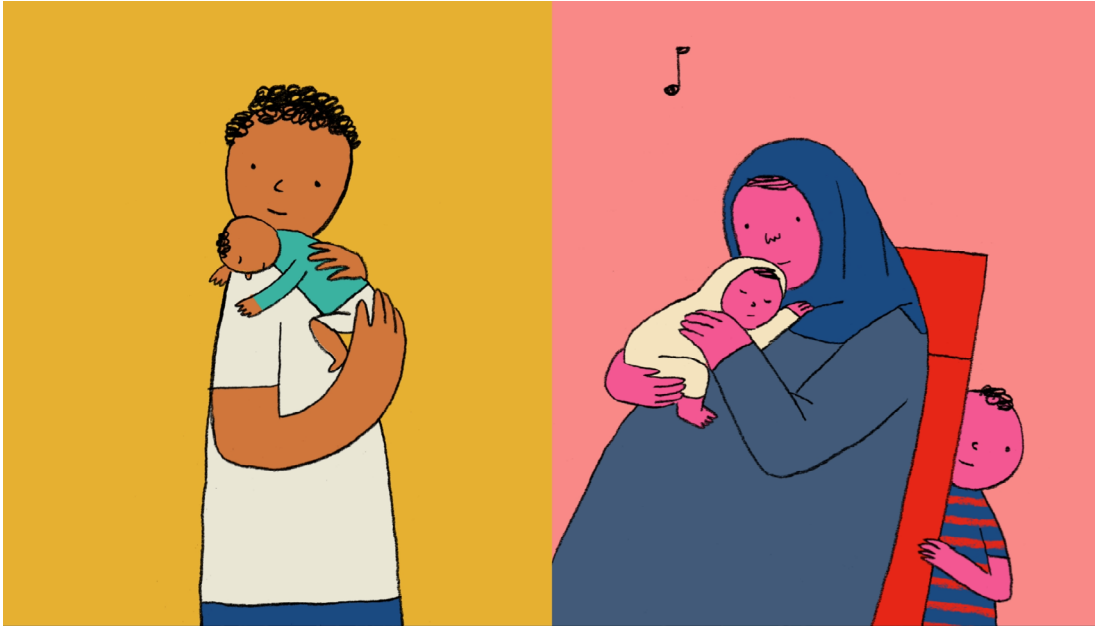
Co-regulation helps children to understand that they can rely on their caregivers for support if needed. This supports the development of secure relationships. When children feel that they can rely on an adult it also gives them confidence to explore the world around them.

Communicating with others

It is unhelpful for adults to minimise, dismiss or devalue children's emotions. However, as children grow, adults can help them express feelings in constructive and socially and culturally appropriate ways¹⁴. This helps a child develop the skills they need to express themselves and nurture their relationships.

Focusing our thoughts

When emotions escalate to intense levels, or overwhelm us, it makes it harder to keep control of our behaviour and respond to challenging situations in constructive ways. Feeling safe, having comfort and support from adults, and learning to manage our emotions helps us to focus our thoughts.



Not experiencing co-regulation can have detrimental impacts on development

Experiencing big emotions without the ability to calm is upsetting for children and can result in behaviours that challenge them and others around them. It can also have major impacts on their health. When babies and young children are exposed to prolonged levels of stress that are not regulated by care givers, it is called “toxic stress”. This can disrupt healthy brain development and other biological systems, with lasting impacts on health and wellbeing¹⁵.

Children who experience chronic, unregulated stress may develop overactive stress-response systems. This can heighten children’s physiological responses to stress^{16,17}. For example, a child may be more likely to exhibit a “fight or flight” response in a stressful situation, which makes it harder for them to respond in a calm and rational way.

Co-regulation helps a child to feel safe and loved

Co-regulation helps a child learn that their emotions matter, and that they can rely on the adults around them for support.

When adults acknowledge and respond respectfully to children's feelings, they provide a powerful early experience of being seen and understood. This upholds a child's rights – enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – to express their views and feelings, and to have them considered and taken seriously¹⁸.



Using co-regulation in practice

As a practitioner working with families, you might find that some parents think responding to a babies' crying (for example) might "spoil" them, leading them to become over-reliant on adults, and impairing their ability to "self-soothe". Talking about co-regulation can help caregivers understand that soothing a baby actually builds the skills needed for independence later on.

Some adults struggle with children's big feelings and associated behaviours and find them overwhelming. They might need support to take time out for a moment to regulate themselves.

Strong emotions in children may be interpreted as misbehaviour. Some adults may feel embarrassed or ashamed if their child cries a lot or tantrums. In these situations it can be helpful for adults to see that babies and young children cannot manage their emotions alone and to see how, as adults, they can help a child through these difficult moments.

If you want to talk about co-regulation with families, simpler terms like soothing, calming, managing emotions, and bringing big feelings under control might be helpful.

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