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# CO-REGULATION GUIDE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CAREGIVERS:  
HELPING YOUR CHILD FEEL SAFE,  
CALM, AND CAPABLE



# INTRODUCTION



## What Is Co-Regulation?

Co-regulation is the process where your calm, steady nervous system helps your child's overwhelmed nervous system settle.

In simple terms:

**You lend your calm until they can find their own.**

Children are not born knowing how to regulate their emotions. They learn it through repeated experiences of someone staying with them when things feel hard.

When you co-regulate, your child learns:

- I'm not alone
- My feelings are manageable
- I can get through this

# WHY IT MATTERS

When your child is overwhelmed, their brain is not in “learning mode.”

Their prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) goes offline, and their body shifts into survival mode:

- Fight (anger, aggression)
- Flight (avoidance, running away)
- Freeze (shutdown, stuck, withdrawn)

In those moments, logic, consequences, and teaching won't land.

**Connection has to come first.**

Only once your child feels safe again can they:

- Think clearly
- Problem-solve
- Learn new skills



# THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

## MADE SIMPLE

Your child's body is constantly asking:  
*"Am I safe right now?"*

When the answer is "no," their body reacts automatically.

### HYPERAROUSAL

Hyperarousal (Fight / Flight) looks like:

- Yelling, hitting, throwing
- Running away
- Big emotional outbursts
- Overwhelm

### HYPOAROUSAL

Hypoarousal (Freeze / Shutdown) looks like:

- Zoning out
- Refusing to respond
- Low energy, stuck
- "I don't know" / unable to act

**Both are signs your child is struggling, not misbehaving.**



# THE EQUATION

Co-regulation works when you bring two things:

**1. A more regulated version of you**

Not perfect; just steadier than your child

**2. A guess about what your child needs**

- Do they need to calm down? (hyperarousal)
- Or gently wake up? (hypoarousal)

## What Co-Regulation Actually Looks Like

It's not one technique; it's how you show up.

It can be:

- Sitting nearby quietly
- Softening your voice
- Slowing your movements
- Offering simple words
- Staying present without fixing

Sometimes the most powerful thing is: *You stayed.*



# SUPPORTING HYPERAROUSAL

## (BIG EMOTIONS)

*Your goal: help them release energy and feel safe*

### WHAT HELPS

- Calm, firm boundaries
- “I won’t let you hit. I’m right here.”
- Reduce stimulation (less noise, fewer words)
- Let them move:
  - Jumping
  - Stomping
  - Squeezing something
- Slow your voice and body
- Breathe slowly (they often match you)

### AVOID

- Lecturing
- Asking lots of questions
- Matching their intensity
- Forcing eye contact



# SUPPORTING HYPOAROUSAL

## (SHUTDOWN)

*Your goal: gently bring them back online.*

### WHAT HELPS

- Soft presence
- Simple, low-demand questions
  - “Is this blue or purple?”
- Sensory input:
  - Warm drink
  - Cozy blanket
- Small actions:
  - “Can you wiggle your fingers?”
- Patience (this takes time)

### AVOID

- Pushing too fast
- Ignoring or walking away
- Overloading with demands



# CONNECTION

## BEFORE CORRECTION

When a child is dysregulated, phrases like *“you know better,”* *“stop crying,”* or *“go calm down”* often don’t work. In those moments, your child’s thinking brain is offline, so logic, correction, or demands won’t land the way we hope they will.

What does help is connection.

Simple, grounding language like *“that was really frustrating,”* *“I’m right here,”* or *“we’ll figure this out together”* can support your child in feeling safe again. From that place of safety, their brain can come back online, and that’s when learning, problem-solving, and regulation become possible.

Over time, your child internalizes your responses.

They begin to believe:

- I can handle hard things
- My feelings make sense
- I’m capable
- I can calm myself

**This is how self-regulation develops.**



# YOUR REGULATION FIRST

You cannot co-regulate if you're fully overwhelmed.

You don't need to be perfectly calm, just more regulated than your child.

Build your own regulation habits:

## OUTSIDE THE MOMENT

- Rest, food, water
- Movement
- Lowering unnecessary demands
- Knowing your triggers

## IN THE MOMENT

- Step away briefly (when safe)
- Take slow breaths (longer exhales)
- Use movement (push against a wall, shake out energy)
- Lower stimulation



# REAL LIFE SCENARIOS

## Scenario 1: “Put your shoes on” → meltdown

What might be happening underneath:  
Transition + demand + possible overwhelm

Instead of:

*“Just put your shoes on. We’re late.”*

Try:

*“I can see this is hard to start. I’m right here.”*

(Pause)

*“Do you want help or do you want to try first?”*

You’re reducing pressure + supporting task initiation

## Scenario 2: Child throws something when frustrated

What might be happening underneath:  
Fight response (too much energy in the body)

Instead of:

*“Stop throwing things!”*

Try:

*“I won’t let you throw that. I’m going to move it.”*

(Pause, stay close)

*“Your body needs to get that energy out. Let’s stomp/jump/squeeze this.”*

Boundary + regulation support



# REAL LIFE SCENARIOS

## Scenario 3: Child freezes and won't respond

What might be happening underneath:  
Shutdown (overwhelm, low energy)

Instead of:

*"Why aren't you listening?"*

Try:

*"Hey... I'm here."*

(Pause)

*"Can you show me with your finger... this one or this one?"*

Lower demand + gentle activation

## Scenario 4: Big emotions over something "small"

What might be happening underneath:  
Nervous system sees a threat (even if we don't)

Instead of:

*"It's not a big deal."*

Try:

*"I won't let you throw that. I'm going to move it."*

(Pause, stay close)

*"That was really disappointing. I get why that felt big."*

Validation helps the body settle



# REGULATION PLAN

## STEP 1



### Regulate Yourself

Ask yourself:

- Am I breathing?
- Is my voice calm?
- Can I slow down?

You don't need to be perfect; just steadier than your child.

## STEP 2



### Read Your Child's State

High energy → help them calm down

Low energy → help them gently engage

## STEP 3



### Choose One Action

If your child is escalated:

- Lower your voice
- Reduce words
- Offer movement
- Set calm boundaries

If your child is shut down:

- Stay close
- Use simple prompts
- Add sensory input
- Go slow

## STEP 4



### Stay (this is the hardest part)

Resist the urge to:

- Fix it quickly
- Teach a lesson
- Walk away (unless you need to regulate)

Your presence is what creates safety

## STEP 5



### Teach Later

After they are calm, reflect together, problem solve, and build missing skills.



# PROGRESS

## NOT PERFECTION

You will not get this right every time. That's not the goal.

The goal is to:

- Build safety
- Strengthen connection
- Teach lifelong skills

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Behavior is communication
- Dysregulation is not defiance
- Connection must come before correction
- Your calm is the most powerful tool
- Co-regulation builds self-regulation

### FINAL REMINDER

- You don't need more control.
- You don't need better consequences.
- You need connection, consistency, and regulation.
- And you don't have to do this alone.

