

Coregulation Between Children and Non-Parental Adults

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The Concept of Coregulation – An Introduction

Consider this situation: *You are holding a newborn. The infant begins to cry and is quickly ramping up to a screaming level. What is your natural reaction?*

People tend to react by some version of standing up and walking, bouncing up and down rapidly, talking to the baby, singing, and other similar actions. As the baby begins to settle, so does the caregiver, their movements and verbalizations becoming slowly quieter and calmer in time with the baby's body language and volume.

For some reason, as time progresses and the child grows older, we no longer react in that way. When they are upset, we tell them to "calm down" or command them to tell us what they want or need so that we can help them. What if, alternatively, we took our management of their emotions back to the beginning?

The process of matching your reactions to another person's emotions- as we do with crying infants- is called "coregulation" and it has become an underrated concept in our Western culture. The process of a mother reacting to her infant's emotions begins the process of forming attachment, which is a concept developed by John Bowlby (1969) which describes the type of security (or lack thereof) a baby has to its mother and, in the future, to the world. The more the mother coregulates with her baby and consistently meets the infant's needs, the more secure that infant's attachment will become. In a study by Guo, et. al. (2015), parent-child dyads who practiced effective coregulation and freely worked through both positive and negative emotions were more securely attached. Thus, it could be said that there is evidence that coregulation and attachment are linked inextricably.

The Importance of Coregulation on the Development of Self-Regulation in Infancy and Beyond

The goal of coregulation is, ideally, to develop within a child the ability to self-regulate effectively. It is relatively well-established that the quality of parent-child attachment has a major effect on the child's ability or inability to self-regulate their emotions as they grow (Lobo & Lunkenheimer, 2020). Mutual-positive and mutual-negative emotions during the external regulation of an infant or child (coregulation) and the flexibility of the parent-child pair in fluidly moving between emotional engagements is an important aspect of effective emotional coregulation.

The goal of the process of coregulation in infancy and toddlerhood is to develop within a child the ability to regulate their emotions themselves. This skill is often referred to as self-regulation, which can be defined as the ability to manage and work through emotions and behaviors, and body when faced with a potentially upsetting situation (Morin, 2021). In other words- the ability to control their responses to big emotions. The ability to self-regulate is an important lifelong skill that, when mastered, becomes a catalyst for successful living.

Silkenbeumer, Schiller, & Kärtner (2018) postulated that children develop self-regulation, which they defined as "reflective emotion regulation", by first being guided by parents who assist their children in working through emotions and model self-regulation. The same study showed that parents who effectively coached the emotions of their children and helped them develop a language of emotions tended to foster better self-regulation in their children.

Several circumstances could potentially inhibit a child's ability to learn self-regulation. Insecure attachment, trauma, developmental disorders, attention difficulties, and environmental challenges are all potentially inhibiting factors. Whatever the reason for an inability of a child to

regulate their dysregulated mind and body, it is the job of the mature adults around them to help those children grow and develop into self-regulated people who are productive members of society.

Can a Non-Parental Adult Coregulate with a Child?

Is coregulation a concept fit only for parents and infants, or can it extend to a wider net of people and circumstances? Consider a situation in which a kindergartener is struggling with his emotions at school. Is a teacher capable of coregulating with that student? Is a parent in a foster home able to help a foster child work through their emotions using coregulation? Is a babysitter or nanny capable of coregulating with an upset infant?

Eventually, an infant or child will transition from spending most of their time with direct caregivers and move into the world of important but varying adult influences. The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility that coregulation can be used in a variety of situations where caring, invested adults are involved in the lives of infants, children, and even adolescents in order to encourage and teach self-regulation skills that a child will use for a lifetime. In cases where self-regulation is underdeveloped, other adults in the child's life may be required to come alongside them and help model regulation techniques for both emotions and behaviors. First, the paper will explore a few types of non-parental adults who may be called upon to coregulate with a child. Secondly, this paper will address coregulation strategies that are practical and evidence-based which the aforementioned non-parental adult influences can use.

Non-Parental Adults Involved With Coregulation

Medical Staff Working with Newborns

Newborns who end up residing in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) for any length of time are separated from their mothers more often and for longer periods than the

average newborn. This type of circumstance quickly introduces non-parental adults such as doctors, nurses, and other care staff into the relationship equation of a newborn's life. These adults will be responding to the physical and emotional needs of the infant almost as often as the parents, which will put them in the position of helping the infant regulate. A study by Sanders & Hall (2018) concluded that medical staff can serve as emotional buffers for both mothers and newborns during an unfamiliar and potentially intimidating or scary hospital stay. They indicated that if the mothers are uncomfortable and dysregulated, it will not be possible for them to help their newborn regulate using coregulation strategies. For coregulation to be successful at the newborn stage, the mother needs to have a level of regulation and, ideally, the mother and infant should be engaged in some kind of skin-to-skin contact (Sanders & Hall, 2018). In this study, the role of non-parental adults was not only to help the infant regulate when necessary (soothe, comfort, meet needs, etc.) but also to assist the mothers in preparing to meet the needs of their infants in an unfamiliar medical setting.

Teachers

Preschool

In the study by Silkenbeumer, Schiller, & Kärtner (2018), the authors set out to explore theories regarding the ways teachers co-regulate with their preschool students in a classroom setting and under what circumstances children can consistently self-regulate. In the article, the authors acknowledge the importance of the caregiver-child coregulation relationship. The study found that preschool teachers are, in fact, able to coregulate with their students and that it has a positive effect on the emotional self-regulation of preschoolers.

On an organizational level, preschools and early childhood care centers have the opportunity to assist in the development of emotional regulation in their students by continually

meeting high-quality standards and promoting emotional education (Broekhuizen et. al., 2017). Teachers who uphold the quality of their centers and are emotionally responsive and sensitive to the social needs of their students have the potential to create a sense of security (Broekhuizen et. al., 2017).

Elementary & Middle School

In elementary and middle schools, classroom teachers have the opportunity to continue to do the work which parents and child-care providers have hopefully started. Meeting the basic needs of students- food, safety, autonomy, relatedness, competence, etc.- is a non-negotiable prerequisite for effective instruction (Singh et. al., 2018). When these needs are met, students are better able to apply themselves to the concepts being presented at school.

Part of meeting those basic needs is helping students know what to do and how to react to the big feelings they may experience. When school staff effectively model emotional regulation, prosocial skills, problem-solving strategies, and processing negative events, students have the opportunity to develop positive teacher-student relationships and continue to develop emotional regulation skills (Split et. al., 2021). One essential prerequisite skill a teacher must develop when learning to coregulate is the management of their own emotions and reactions (Rishel et. al., 2019). This is logical because if the non-parental adult does not have strong self-regulation skills, any attempt at coregulating with students will be sub-optimal and potentially completely ineffective.

Since trauma is one of the most prevalent reasons for a severe lack of self-regulation skills, schools who instruct their staff on the signs of trauma (internalizing, externalizing, withdrawal, etc.) have a better chance of serving their students more effectively and providing or referring them to the services they need most (Rishel et. al., 2019).

High School

In adolescence, many of the same coregulation theories apply to high school teachers. The ways teachers use their tacit knowledge to work through negative emotional situations with their students play a role in adolescents learning to problem-solve on their own (Rämä & Kontu, 2012). Coregulation is a social process and involves both verbal and non-verbal communication and adolescents are potentially more capable of sifting through social and communication nuances than their younger counterparts.

In a well-managed classroom, there is an agreed-upon structure that inhabits the classroom atmosphere. Coregulation is reached when there is an instance in which the agreed-upon structure is broken (i.e. negative behaviors or disobedience) and there is movement toward mending the rift by both students and teachers (Rämä & Kontu, 2012). While this version of coregulation looks much different than the rocking and soothing of a crying baby, the concept is the same: The adult leads and matches the energy of the student while modeling how to regulate the heightened emotions and control the behaviors that may stem from that emotion. By the end of the situation, both parties should be calm and the structure should be back in place.

Foster and Adoptive Parents

In foster families, the concept of coregulation is not well-studied. Foster families are, however, integral parts of foster children's emotional regulation education. These families are characterized by flexibility and good parenting, along with being child-oriented and caring (Van Holen et. al., 2019). Coregulation techniques used by parents and other caregivers are also applicable to the foster care context.

Adoptive parents, like biological and foster parents, have the ability to develop a mutually-beneficial relationship with their children. They are also able to model, teach, and encourage emotional regulation within their children, both biological and adopted.

Practical Coregulation Strategies for Non-Parental Figures to Increase Children’s Self-Regulation

Encourage Problem-Solving Solutions

In many situations with varying ages of children (from toddler to adolescent), the most practical and verbal way of encouraging self-regulation is to model the reaction you want the child to demonstrate and then, when the child is ready, ask a question that will encourage problem-solving (Rämä & Kontu, 2012; Silkenbeumer et. al., 2018). For example, if a preschooler is becoming upset because another child is playing with a desired object, the adult in the situation could say, “I see that you want that toy and are feeling upset. Your friend is playing with that toy right now.” Once the child begins to calm their body, the adult could pose a problem-solving question “What could you do/say if you wanted a turn?” This question allows the child to explore his or her options and practice autonomy.

These interactions do not always need to be carried out verbally. In fact, in many situations, all that is needed to encourage emotional regulation by problem-solving is clear body language. For instance, if you are a classroom teacher and a student is physically intruding or disrupting during the morning greeting time, thus breaking down the structure of the classroom routine, the teacher may choose to implement planned ignoring or calmly refuse to break the routine themselves by aiming their body and limbs toward the student they were already greeting (Rämä & Kontu, 2012). The teacher in this situation is demonstrating not only authoritative teaching practices but also modeling a calm reaction to a breach in routine. At this point, the

student can choose to read and respect the non-verbal reaction of the teacher and work to infer what the most regulated behavioral choice would be.

Supportive Responses

Non-parental figures can support children through negative emotions in a variety of ways. Verbal support, physical affection, naming and labeling emotions, and presenting solutions are some ways to provide support (Swartz & McElwain, 2012). However, some of these in and of themselves are not necessarily coregulating. The adult must model and work through the emotion and situation *with* the child, not just take an observer's role. This will require the adult to get on the child's level, address, label, and validate the emotion the child is displaying and working through that emotion. Once the child is able to think logically again, the adult can ask solution-oriented questions. The aim of supportive responses is to think forward to how you would like the child to respond to this situation in the future and work with them to reach that goal.

Teach and Model Coping Skills

Dr. Stephanie Grant (2020) teaches that coping skills are not things to present when a child is already upset. Instead, the coping skills should be taught and used ahead of a big emotion. Dr. Grant also says that adults need to be taught and use coping skills regularly in order to be ready to coregulate with a child when the need arises. She teaches a grounding strategy that brings our brains back to the present moment instead of the escalating circumstance. Lifting your hand and naming the things you can sense is a powerful grounding tool. Name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and ask yourself if you can taste something. This tool should be used at the very beginning of an

escalating situation instead of in the middle. This and all following tools may become irrelevant in a state of heightened emotion with the child or the adult refusing to use these strategies.

Deep breathing is an important part of the physical portion of emotional regulation. Deep breathing calms our bodies and our brains. Unfortunately, many children resist deep breathing when they are dysregulated. Dr. Grant (2020) encourages the adult to see if they can, at the very least, watch for the child to be breathing out longer than they are breathing in- ideally in through their nose and out through the mouth. Younger children may be able to practice deep breathing by acting it out in a play situation. For instance, Dr. Grant (2020) demonstrates a technique that shows her as the adult pretending to take a cookie out of the oven stating that it is very hot, and the child needs to help by blowing on it. In this way, the child is deep breathing without even know it. One powerful way to encourage deep breathing without demanding that a child participates in this coping skill with your words is to simply sit next to them and deep breathe yourself. This is powerful because not only are you encouraging regulation through modeling, you are also grounding and calming yourself in the process. As discussed earlier, the self-regulation ability of the adult is the most important part of coregulating with a child.

Music, Movement, and Rhythm

The cognitive benefits of formal music training have often been studied and supported in the literature. The synchronization of beat and rhythm is often indicated as a way to increase language, motor, and auditory attention skills (Williams, 2018). Additionally, there are positive correlations between beat synchronization and emotional regulation (Williams, 2018). In one study a group of six-year-olds self-reported that they felt more able to control their bodies after participating in a group practicing structured dancing as a way to use beat synchronization. The power of beat synchronizing with a group is an important way to coregulate with a group of

people. Tapping sticks to the beat, hitting hands against legs to the beat of a song, or any other activity that promotes group beat synchronization can be a good way to bring the energy down in a group and help regulate children's bodies.

Conclusion

Although coregulation is well-studied and highly important in relationships between mothers and infants and fathers and infants, these are not the only relationships that can benefit from regulating an adult and child together. The goal of successful coregulation is to teach, model, and encourage self-regulation. The goal of this paper was to explore the role of various non-parental adults in coregulating with children. The participation of these outside adults is important in the development of emotional regulation in children. Medical care providers, child-care workers, teachers, and foster/adoptive parents are just some of the adults that can help children regulate. Strategies for coregulation include encouraging problem-solving solutions, using supportive responses with a coregulation focus, teaching and modeling coping skills and using them before an escalation, and using music and rhythm to regulate a group. Coregulation is an important method of teaching children how to cope with intense emotions and model correct responses to those situations.

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