



Co-Regulation and Self-Regulation

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February 2012

NMAIMH competencies addressed

Theoretical Foundations

- infant & young child development and behavior
- relationship-based, therapeutic practice

Direct Service Skills

- observation & listening
- responding with empathy

Reflection

- curiosity
- professional/personal development

When we talk about regulation, we are talking about regulating our level of arousal. Our level of arousal has to do with how calm or excited we are, and is often manifested in two ways. Outwardly, it is expressed as our feelings or emotions. Do we look calm, concerned, angry or scared? Inwardly, the higher our state of arousal, the faster our heart beats, the shallower we breathe and the tenser our muscles are. This is the physiological or body level response.

Our ability to regulate our arousal level is one of the core competencies that an infant must begin to develop because it provides the foundation that later allows us to attend to information in our environment that is useful, and to tune out what is not useful. It is crucial to self-control and, ultimately, our ability to form relationships with others in culturally acceptable ways. For these reasons and others, Dr. Allan Schore (2001) sees this transfer of regulation from external (relying on others) to internal (developing the capacities to self-regulate) as the key task of early development.

The infant is born with a limited capacity to self-regulate. When overwhelmed by the external environment, for example, she can simply fall asleep. But most often when an infant feels a sensation in her body, whether it is hunger or some other type of discomfort, she has very few options. Typically, when an unfamiliar or uncomfortable sensation arises, the infant cries to signal her parent (or caregiver) that something is the matter. If in response the parent picks up the infant, makes eye contact and talks softly to her, and the infant begins to calm down, this is co-regulation.

The above description, however, is incomplete because although the parent has primary responsibility for reading and responding the infant's cues, it is not a one-sided

affair. Fogel and Garvey (2007) describe co-regulation as “a form of coordinated action between participants that involves a continuous mutual adjustment of actions and intentions” (p. 251).

There are at least a couple of important points to take away from this. One is that co-regulation is not a one-way street. It involves back and forth exchanges with each participant adjusting their response based on the response of the other. It is that interactive dance in which the infant and parent provide moment-to-moment feedback to each other.

A second point is that we utilize both co-regulation *and* self-regulation throughout our lifetime. The development of self-regulation, in part, requires the development of higher-level thinking. It is, for example, the ability to recognize that when something or someone triggers us, we need to take a moment to breathe or otherwise bring down our level of arousal before we respond. It requires a level of awareness and ability to reflect. This type of processing is often referred to as top down processing, or thinking our way through something. Yet we *also* rely on each other to co-regulate our level of arousal, especially in more intimate relationships. In fact, “the ability to quickly use the resources of a close other may represent a so-called fast route to emotional regulation” (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008, p. 157). That is, co-regulation can often bring down our level of arousal more rapidly than self-regulation because the latter requires us, on some level, to think it through (top down processing). “Being with”, on the other hand, can help co-regulate the other more quickly because it bypasses our thinking brain (bottom-up processing).

Our use of co-regulation, then, is not a one-way process or just as a stepping-stone to self-regulation, but something that is both interactive and changes and evolves over time as we grow and mature. Both co-regulation *and* self-regulation play important roles in our growth and development throughout our lifespan.

Talking points for supervisors

- Observing the infant-parent relationship through the lens of co-regulation, are there opportunities to notice what is & isn't working when a child is dysregulated?
- What is the home visitor's understanding of the relationship between co-regulation, “being with” and parallel process?
- How might the home visitor use reflective supervision to explore times when it is more or less challenging to help a parent co-regulate?

References/Additional Resources

- Fogel, A. & Garvey, A. (2007). Alive communications. *Infant Behavior & Development*, 30, 251-257.
- Sbarra, D. A. & Hazan, C. (2008). Coregulation, dysregulation, self-regulation: An integrative analysis and empirical agenda for understanding adult attachment, separation, loss and recovery. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12, 141-167.
- Schore, A. N. (2001). The effects of early relational trauma on right brain development, affect regulation, & infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 22, 201-269.