The REL-i Model: Teaching Caregivers How to Co-Regulate Young Children

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Pediatricians are Poised to Promote Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

The first 5 years of the human lifespan mark a critical time for rapid brain development.

During this time children are scheduled for multiple well-child examinations.

![Immunization Schedule](https://example.com/immunization-schedule.png)
Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health: An Opportunity for Prevention

**Intervention Mindset:**
Diagnosis problem and treat or refer

**Prevention Mindset:**
Prevent problems from arising and optimize well-being and development

*An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure*
- Benjamin Franklin -
What is Co-regulation?
What is Co-regulation?

A dynamic, bi-directional process in which each partner makes contingent moment-to-moment adjustments to the behaviors of others.
Why is Co-regulation Important?
Why is Co-regulation Important?

Co-regulation provides children with the support, guidance and modeling they need to “understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviors.”

- Murray 2015
Why is Co-regulation Important?

**Promotes Self-regulation** - Improves impulse control, ability to resolve problems, learn new things and recover from difficulty

**Promotes Secure Attachment** - Informs child's developing representations of self and other that have a life-long influence on their relationships and self-esteem

*Feldman 1999; Schore 2005; Guo 2015*
Self-Regulation and Secure-Attachments Are Associated with Lifelong Well-Being

Increased IQ, Improved Attention
Academic success
Better peer relations
Improved mental and physical health

*Sanders, 2013
What does co-regulation look like?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEBZht0

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-H14NNUYwVc (start at 1:10)

https://members.circleofsecurityinternational.com/chapter-8-american-english-original

(Start 4:57)
The REL-i ("rely") Model of Co-Regulation

The REL-i Model offers providers the framework and materials needed to integrate a preventive approach into their everyday practice by promoting the capacity of caregivers to co-regulate their infants and young children.
REL-i Model of Co-Regulation: Caregiver Strategies

Regulation (self)
Empathy
Limit Setting
Intervention
REL-i Model of Co-Regulation

1. INCIDENT
2. PEAK DYSREGULATION
3. RE-REGULATED

CHILD ACTIVATION

CAREGIVER ACTIVATION

CAREGIVER STRATEGY

SELF-REGULATE   EMPATHIZE   SET LIMITS   INTERVENE
The REL-i ("rely") Model in Everyday Practice

1. Illustrate the importance of co-regulation and its components. Co-regulation is how infants and young children develop trust, gain self-esteem, and learn to self-regulate. These are the four components of co-regulation.

2. Help caregivers choose a focus component. Would you like more information about any of these strategies?

3. Provide REL-i material regarding that component, and explain the process. The goal is not to get it perfect every time, but to understand what does work for your child.

4. Make note of the focus area in the child's chart, follow-up with the caregiver at the next appointment and provide additional support as needed. So, how did it go with ____? What did you notice working?
For Caregivers Wanting Help with Self-Regulation

HOW I USED TO TALK TO MY KIDS
(BEFORE I LOST MY GODDAMN MIND)

THEN

WE DON'T SHOOT WATER GUNS IN THE HOUSE.  WHY NOT?
YOU'RE GONNA GET EVERYTHING WET.  SO?
SO, EVERYTHING WILL GET RUINED.  NO IT WON'T.
YES IT WILL.  NUH-UH.

NOW

WE DON'T SHOOT WATER GUNS IN THE HOUSE.  WHY NOT?
BECAUSE I SAID SO!!

Facebook.com/FowlLanguageComics  FowlLanguageComics.com  ©Brian Gordon
Strategies for Improving Self-Regulation

In Advance:

REFLECT – what are your triggers? Situational and historical?

VISUALIZE – how you want to respond in situations that trigger you?

In the Moment:

NOTICE – when you become dysregulated (what does it feel like in your body?)

BREATHE – deep exhalation with a relaxed jaw

BECOME CURIOUS – Why is my child behaving this way? What is motivating the behavior? What
Self-Regulation <=> Empathy

**Stress impairs empathy** – dysregulation interferes with the caregivers's capacity to empathize with the child, AND young children are generally unreceptive to reason when they are dysregulated.

**Understanding promotes self-regulation** – Making meaning of the child's behavior helps organize the caregiver.
Meaning can be regulating or dysregulating

Meaning that dysregulates:

- Blaming oneself - *this behavior means something bad about me*
- Blaming the child - *this mean something bad about my child*
- Trauma trigger - *this reminds me of something frightening*

Meaning that regulates:

- Specific to the state of the child
- Developmentally appropriate
- Project a benign interpretation
Providers can help promote caregiver self-regulation by understanding what meaning the caregiver is making of the child's behavior and assisting them in making more developmentally appropriate, state-specific, benign interpretations.
**Blaming Oneself**

**Caregiver:** When he doesn't get what he wants, he has big tantrums. What should I do?

**Provider:** How do you respond?

**Caregiver:** I guess I get angry and just walk away.

**Provider:** What are you thinking when that happens?

**Caregiver:** Like 'what am I doing wrong that he gets so angry?!!'

**Provider:** You don't have to feel it's your job to prevent him from getting angry, children have big feelings, and it is normal for them to get angry when they don't get what they want, but you can begin to help him learn how to cope with these big feelings.
Blaming the Child

**Caregiver:** Like 'what is wrong with him? Why is he so aggressive?'

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**Provider:** Expressing anger is normal in young children, especially when they don't get what they want, because they are just learning to cope with these big feelings, and they haven't mastered this developmental milestone yet, but you can begin to help him learn how to cope with these big feelings.
For Caregivers Wanting Help With Empathizing

"Accepting the applause for Mr. Fontana—Mr. Fontana’s mother."
What is Empathy?

The capacity to feel and understand another's internal experience.
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SET LIMITS
INTERVENE
Common Dysregulating Triggers for Young Children

Hunger
Tired
Bored
Wanting to explore and feel more independent
Wanting comfort and safety (pain, scared)
Difficulty with transitions or delayed gratification
Jealousy
Non-Verbal Communication Helps Caregivers Understand Behavior and Express Empathy

Facial Expression (gaze)
Body Gestures (attention, orientation)
Vocalization (tone, rhythm)
Touch (pressure, rhythm)

*Beebe, B. (2019)*
Promoting Empathy: ASK and LISTEN

“I wonder why she does that? Do you have any clues from what you notice in her expression, body language, or tone of voice?”
“To me, the biggest gift I can give to each parent: 
**Watch your baby** and trust that baby to tell you when you're on the right track and when you're not.”

- Berry Brazelton, M.D.
Promoting Empathy:
REINFORCE the POSITIVE

Look how she recognizes your voice! She knows what her mommy sounds like.

Did you notice how he looked away for a moment, and then when he was ready, he looked back at us, ready to engage again. That is a good sign he is developing the capacity for self-regulation.

You are so gentle with her. She really seems to respond to your touch.
Promote Empathy by Providing Empathy and Modeling Curiosity and Reflection

It can be so hard to know why children do what they do when they cannot yet tell us! We wonder, and make our best guess about what might be motivating their behavior, but often we only know if we're right based on how they responds, and sometimes it can take awhile to figure it out.
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For Parents Seeking Help
Setting Limits

THE SURRENDERED MOM

You need five hundred dollars for a beanbag chair? Sounds like a plan!

Drive you and six friends to the mall? Why, I'd love to!

You're quitting middle school? Well, you know best!
Setting Limits

Providers can help caregivers understand limits. *Limits are important because they help the child know what to expect.*

Providers can help caregiver with limited resources, enabling Children are more likely to accept limits when they are calm.
Helping Couples Meet in the Middle
Rather than Play Tug of War

Children need BOTH empathy AND limits.

When caregivers split the task of providing empathy and

Both caregivers have something important to offer and can learn from one another.
For Parents Who Want Help Intervening

“We think he needs more individual neglect.”
Behavioral Interventions

Ease children towards more positive and rewarding environments.

Behavioral Interventions are the icing on the cake, not f
Behavioral Interventions

Focus on something positive/future
Use humor
Counting gives the child a chance to transition
Distraction
Engage them in a solution
Rewards/Punishment
Self time
Be creative!
Depression Can Interfere with Interventions in Repair Process

**Normal Controls in Still-Face**
Repair – Relatively more positive affect

**Maternal Depression**
Repair – Relatively more negative affect

*Tronick, E. 2008*
Only need to get it right 30% of the time!
Putting it all together

Some everyday examples connecting the components of co-regulation into a fluid response:

“Of course you want that lollipop, but we're not going to have candy now. You can have something yummy after dinner for dessert tonight.”

“I know you love playing with that toy car, but we need to get ready for school now. Can you show me your toothbrush?”
Putting it all together

Sometimes co-regulation happens in microsecond and sometimes it can take half an hour or more.

Not all the components necessarily need to happen every time.

Not all the components are equally as important for every child.

Often co-regulation is non-linear, caregivers go back and forth between the steps, not in only one direction.
Summary

The REL-i Model offers a preventive model of care that optim
If you are interested in learning more, contact me:

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