

## TUESDAY 31<sup>ST</sup> MARCH 2020 STAYING CONNECTED AND CURIOUS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### Knowledge and understanding of attachment and trauma

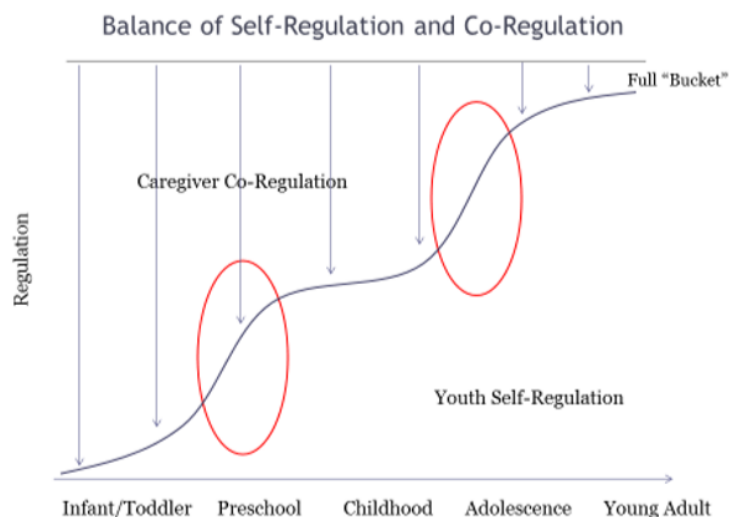
#### ***It Takes Two: The Role of Co-Regulation in Building Self-Regulation Skills***

Today, I'd like to follow on from Day 4 and focus on regulation. There is currently a lot of nonsense talked about self-regulation in infants and children. Self-regulation is an adult skill, which requires a fully mature pre-frontal cortex (PFC). The PFC reaches maturity in women at around 25 years of age, and in men, at around 27. Thus, if you work with children of any age, their PFC will be immature, and children of all ages need co-regulation from adults in order to regulate.

Although it may sound like something internal to an individual, self-regulation develops through interaction with caregivers such as parents, teachers, coaches and other adults. Further, self-regulation development is dependent on predictable, responsive, and supportive environments. Parental warmth, responsiveness, and sensitivity predict self-regulation development and can help to buffer the effects of other stressors that the child may encounter in the family, school and/or social environments.

Capacity for self-regulation develops over time, from infancy through young adulthood (and beyond). Consequently, the amount of co-regulation a child, youth, or young adult needs should vary as they grow.

#### **Theoretical model of the balance of a child/young person's capacity for self-regulation and need for adult support**



The model is a conceptual depiction of normative growth in self-regulation capacity; the exact ratio will vary by individual and situation, but generally speaking, there is a sharp increase in capacity between the third and fourth

birthdays, and again, at adolescence. However, even older teenagers have far from a 'full bucket' of self-regulation, and will still need the support of co-regulating adults.

Depending on developmental stage, environmental circumstances, and individual differences, children and young people themselves have the capacity to fill their self-regulation bucket to varying levels. To successfully manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, they need caregivers to provide co-regulation that fills the remainder of the bucket – regardless of their age.

Without a co-regulating adult, children may be developmentally delayed in their ability to self-regulate, and will need, at whatever age, an adult who can go back to the earlier stages of co/self-regulation, and re-do the steps, in a nurturing and supportive manner.

### **Early experience and self-regulation**

Children who have experienced harsh parenting, maltreatment, and environmental adversity such as poverty and food insecurity do more poorly on indicators of self-regulation across cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domains. Differences can also be seen in the physiology of their stress response, so they have smaller window of stress tolerance than children who have received nurturing and attuned care. Watch this video from Beacon House, which illustrates and explains this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcm-1FBrDvU>

### **Case Studies for reflection: The Child's Perspective**

- *Three-year-old Eddie leapt down the stairs unsupported and unsupervised. He lost his grip and fell down the stairs, ending up in a ball-like shape wedged against the wall. Eddie cried and held on to his leg in pain. His father initially ignored his cries and then eventually, as this escalated, began to laugh at and humiliate him: "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to walk down the stairs, you're so clumsy, stop being a baby, and get up."*
- *Baby Shannon was held in the arms of her mother, Sandra, who was at the same time experiencing extreme verbal hostility and physical aggression from her partner. Sandra's fear levels continued to rise, and she became lost in her own survival mode and dysregulation. Therefore, at that time, despite Shannon crying for a prolonged period, Sandra was unable to provide her with the sense of containment, safety, sensitivity, regulation and security that she needed.*

- Four-year-old Monica would try everything in her power to get some sort of response from her mother, Sue. However, despite endless efforts, Sue rarely responded or engaged with Monica. She would provide her with basic care, but struggled to provide her with stimulation or relational interaction. Monica was faced with being looked through and often being on the receiving end of a still face.
- Two-year-old Zain sat helplessly in his playpen, whilst his mother was repeatedly kicked and thrown around the room by his uncle. He was experiencing a sensory overload of trauma. He could hear the sounds of the household items banging and falling, his uncle shouting in an aggressive manner, and his mother screaming. He also could smell the strong scents of cigarette smoke and the unwashed surroundings, which included his own urine-drenched clothes. At the same time, Zain was contending with the sensations of his beating heart, his body being frozen and literally trapped within the playpen, the hunger pains in his stomach, and the images and facial expressions of fear and pain on his mother's face, and the terrifying rage-filled expressions on his uncle's face.
- Nine-year-old Delilah was experiencing bullying in school. Each day she feared going into class, and the daily comments and personal attacks felt more piercing and intense. When she returned home from school, she retreated to her bedroom. When asked how she was, or how her day had been, she used to respond "Good", with a smile on her face. Delilah's father was struggling with chronic depression following the sudden death of her mother. Delilah had learned to keep her feelings to herself and to portray a happy persona, in order to protect her father from any further pain and to not send him into a deeper depression.

**Partially based on Treisman, K (2018) – A Therapeutic Treasure Box for Working with Children and Adolescents with Developmental Trauma**

Read each case study carefully, then focus on one. Try to view the world from the child's perspective, get into their story, their shoes, their skin ...

- What did the child see?
- What did the child hear?
- What did the child smell?
- What did the child taste?
- What did the child feel? (e.g. intrusive/insufficient touch)
- What were the child's bodily sensations?
- What were the child's emotions?
- What did the child think?
- How might this impact the child's ability to self-regulate?
- How might this child present when you meet her/him in school?
- Make a poster, mindmap or other visual representation to convey something of the child's experience and outcomes. Take a photograph of your work and share with colleagues.

As illustrated by the case studies, relational and developmental trauma is multi-layered and multi-sensory. It permeates all levels of functioning and processing and has a profound impact on the development (or not) of self-regulating abilities. Some children do not consistently and reliably have the experience of feeling physically or emotionally safe, secure and protected (including at a sensory level). They often do not have the same opportunities to internalise a sense of safety, security, relational trust, a grounding anchor, or an internal regulator.

Reflecting on such experiences gives us a small window into their lived experiences; a snapshot rather than the film. However, it begins to give us a sense of how children's sense of safety and felt safety can be impacted within the context of relationships and developmental trauma, and how the expectation to self-regulate can be mis-placed and retraumatising.

### **Covid-19 relevance**

Many children are currently at home because of the pandemic. Can you think of any children in your group/class/school who may be particularly vulnerable at this time, because they have parents who are unwilling or unable to co-regulate? Are there any ways in which you can especially reach out to these very vulnerable families? **NB They are likely to need self-care support rather than academic activities.**

This may be enough for you for today. If you want more, this is an interesting document: <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/Co-RegulationFromBirthThroughYoungAdulthood.pdf>

Don't forget your own self-care today, and be sure to walk in a green space if you can.

Have a good day, keep safe and healthy and ring or email me to chat if that would help. *Jenny x*