

Your 2-minute guide to...

Co-regulation



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Why do we need to know about co-regulation?

We hear a lot about emotional regulation in the early years. We need to remember that this begins in babyhood through the important process of co-regulation.

Co-regulation contributes to the infant's wellbeing, resilience and capacity to form secure attachments with others.

It is the precursor to self-regulation.

What is Co-regulation?

Co-regulation focuses on the role of the caregiver in the infant's emotional regulation.

We all see babies having powerful impulses and emotions, but they are not born with the capacity to manage these. They need a caregiver to step in.

To help soothe the infant, the caregiver might:

- stroke them
- sing gently
- talk reassuringly
- hold them closely
- walk around in the open air
- cradle or rock them
- talk or sing soothingly

This is co-regulation in its earliest and simplest form.

What is the theory behind co-regulation?

Co-regulation has its basis in [attachment theory](#).

When a caregiver engages in co-regulation, this means they show understanding and sympathy to the child. Instead of saying something like ‘don’t cry’, they might say ‘poor you’. Then they help the child to feel calmer.

This begins with the adult staying calm themselves. The adult tunes into the infant and responds sensitively. This attuned interaction creates a safe and calming space where the infant feels understood and loved. Importantly, the caregiver shows through this that the infant’s distress is manageable and won’t overwhelm them.

Settings need to accept this occurrence as a given and manage it supportively in the team. They may, for example, have a back-up system in place. For example, having another person to step in when it’s clear a colleague is struggling, rather than staying away because it’s ‘not their key child’.

This is a very good reason why reflective practice or supervision is an essential aspect of early years practice. Practitioners need a space where they can safely explore their personal emotional responses. Peter Elfer speaks about this [here](#).

5 key reasons that co-regulation is essential to early years practice:

1. It helps the baby self-soothe and develop healthy coping mechanisms
2. It helps establish a strong attachment between the baby and caregiver
3. It helps the baby feel validated and understood
4. It helps the baby feel safe and that their emotions won’t overwhelm them
5. It builds the foundations for healthy emotional and social development.

Longer reads :

How co-regulation helps children handle emotional distress, Mike Huber in [family](#) (2023)

Peter Fonagy’s video about [Attachment Relationships and Self-understanding](#) (2017)

Coming soon: Your 2-minute guide to Self-regulation.