

Learning to Dance: Co-regulation for social and emotional development

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Regular experience of co-regulated engagement offers children the opportunity to develop trust and competence in dynamic social situations. Practice provides a chance to “do- over” aspects of earlier development that were missed. Co-regulation describes a quality of contingent engagement and the sense of “feeling felt” by each person. The experience of mutual contingency and emotional/affect attunement is key and matters more than the specific type of activity. Think of co-regulation as a dance where each person is trying to stay synchronized with the other but neither person is controlling the other. Inevitably, the dance will be fluid at times and sometimes you will step on each other’s toes. Enjoying the dance and recovering from those missteps is what matters most and serves to enhance the child’s social-emotional development.

Co-regulation is an ongoing developmental process for all of us. We all seek connection with others to minimize distress and maximize joy. We hold and play with infants to soothe and comfort them as well as to engage them in serve and return interactions. Over time, infants learn what it feels like to be with another person and these attachment patterns become templates for future relationships. An infant’s earliest interactions are nonverbal and very physical. We hold, rock, swing, move and sing with rhythm and repetition. We follow their interest as they look around and share their joy and curiosity. We use simple pattern games such as peek-a-boo which have a predictable sequence and we add little variations in timing, position and intensity to maintain their interest without overwhelming them. When we play with an infant and they look away briefly we recognize that what we just did might have been too stimulating and we will naturally slow down and wait for them to signal they are ready again by re-establishing eye contact. Thus these are the cycles of engagement and co-regulation. Over time, repeated experiences of feeling regulated (calm, safe, interested in surroundings) with an adult become internalized and lead to what we call self-regulation and greater independence.

Practicing co-regulation in its simpler forms with children who struggle with social development is essentially adapting intuitive face-to-face adult-infant play for older children with more mature motor and verbal skills. Older children are not captive audiences like a babe in arms and may actively resist adult attempts to engage (by controlling or fleeing). The challenge is to find just the right level of complexity and emotional tone, which the child can enjoy. We must also understand the child’s unique sensory experience and make adjustments in our behavior and or the physical space such as limiting lights and noise or keeping just the right amount of space between the child and us. With some children we need to get close and be very animated but with others this is scary so we must approach them from the side and be slow and gentle. When we use co-regulated play with an older child who struggles with social interaction we are showing them that engaging with others can be safe and pleasurable. We are offering them a framework for how to be with another person where no one is controlling the other and it is predictable but not rigid. This enjoyment feeds the child’s intrinsic motivation to seek out more complex and frequent interactions. These experiences are best practiced with sensitive adults at first but will gradually be generalized to peers. The more time a child spends playing with others in this way, the more positive the impact will be. However, even a few minutes here and there throughout each day may improve social interactions and decrease emotional dysregulation.

Components of co-regulated patterns:

- Pattern: motor, vocal/verbal, emotional tone/intensity, eye contact- “I do this, you do that”
- Repetition: pattern must be repeated enough times for child to start anticipating what will happen
- Roles: adult and child each have an “action” or role to perform- hider and seeker
- Choice: child must choose to take an action which will continue the pattern- can be as simple as eye contact, offering a hand or shifting body position
- Variations/Challenges: changes in the pattern that capture attention and or require a different response –

these can vary in degree and style like changing tempo, new actions, shifting roles or body position- Variations must be significant enough to be noticeable but not so dramatic as to overwhelm the child and cause unmanageable uncertainty

- Attunement: matching or complimentary expressions of intensity, timing and shape
- Intermodal Correspondence: i.e. sounds match actions- often intuitive but developmentally significant
- Cycles: engagement is followed by periods of rest or retreat, learning how to repair breakdowns and re-engage is just as meaningful

Monitoring the child:

Accurately assessing the child's continuous availability for engagement, need for sensory modulation, change in challenge level, termination of engagement and emotional well being- these are often very subtle nonverbal signals that tell us when children are receptive and when they are not. A child's level of regulation can change moment to moment and we cannot expect the child to be capable of all their usual skills at all times. For example, it is very difficult for a child with poor language skills to process language when they are highly dysregulated so we need to focus on nonverbal communication in these times.

Monitoring the Environment:

Manipulating the physical space and materials to promote and maintain child engagement and attention. This includes materials, activity and space choice (indoor vs. outdoor), proximity of other children and adults, noise levels and other sensory inputs (smell, visual, tactile, etc.). Removing materials that may be especially distracting or finding a quiet space can be helpful.

Monitoring of Self:

Moment to moment awareness of impact, positive or negative, of your own communications both verbal and nonverbal is critical to fluid engagement with a child. This includes tone, intonation, facial expressions, gestures, body language and pacing, awareness of emotions and feeling of synchronization with child. Continuous monitoring of your own internal thought process, body awareness, stimulation level, and emotional arousal will affect how you communicate with others and how they receive you. Cultivating this awareness in your self will improve how children respond to and engage with you. If you are too focused on getting the child to do something specific, too distracted or agitated you will most likely miss critical subtle signals and invite resistance. When you are genuinely enjoying an interaction with a child you will both feel much more successful and motivated to keep it going!

Engaging the child

- Adult or child initiated, usually adult follows child's interest at first
- Effective use of materials and space, often no materials are best at first
- Proper patterning, role definition and pacing
- Shifting responsibility- child takes on a greater role in order to maintain pattern
- Repair- initiated by adult or child after a pause or breakdown in order to reestablish engagement
- Usually it is best to limit verbal communication and the use of objects at first- focus on physical play like tickles, peek-a-boo, push-pull patterns, etc.

Maintaining Co-regulation and Introducing Challenge/Variation

When, how and what type of variation to introduce

Observing child's reaction to variation

- Did variation enhance the experience?

- Did variation arouse anxiety or cause child to terminate activity?
- Does the child introduce any variations on their own?
- Does the child act as if they need to control the activity?

Dealing with naturally occurring challenges- interruptions by others, missing or breaking materials, sudden noises, etc. Does the child appear to trust that the pattern will be reestablished or repaired despite the unexpected pause? Careful observation of these moments should inform future patterns.

Termination of co-regulated activity

Ending on a positive note, celebration, documentation, reviewing

Enhancing episodic memory by using photos, songs, phrases, sound effects, postures, etc. that mark or signify the experience and can be accessed later for mutual remembering, shared enjoyment and to initiate a future sequence. Naming of roles when activity involves materials can be helpful to connect various activities with similar role functions- i.e. sender/receiver, holder/mixer, etc.

A note on terms:

Co-regulation is just one of many terms used to describe a certain type of social interaction. “Serve and return” or “opening and closing circles of communication” essentially mean the same thing. It is crucial to understand the difference between interactions that are meant to share an experience and those that aim to get the child to perform a particular behavior such as making eye contact, pointing to an object or saying a certain word. While a child might make eye contact, speak or point during co-regulated play, this is not the overarching goal of the interaction. The behavior is an indicator of an underlying psychological process the child is experiencing and is using that behavior to connect with another. Using co-regulated play is at the heart of Floortime, a well-known intervention method for working with children with Autism and part of the DIR model developed by Stanley Greenspan.