

The Importance of Co-Regulation

Why calm, connected adults help build a child's capacity to self-regulate

What Is Co-Regulation?

Co-regulation is the process of a calmer, more regulated nervous system helping another person's nervous system settle, through tone of voice, body language, presence, and connection. It's how humans have always managed big emotions together, long before anyone is expected to manage them alone.

Why It Comes Before Self-Regulation

Self-regulation, the ability to notice and manage one's own emotional and sensory state, develops over time and is built on a foundation of co-regulation. A child (or an adult) who has consistently experienced someone helping to settle their nervous system tends to develop a stronger, more reliable capacity to do this for themselves. Skipping straight to expecting independent self-regulation, without enough co-regulation along the way, can set the bar higher than the nervous system is ready for.

A Neuroaffirming Perspective

Big reactions, meltdowns, shutdowns, or difficulty 'calming down on request' are not defiance or manipulation, they're signs of a nervous system that's overwhelmed and needs support, not correction. Co-regulation isn't about stopping a behaviour as quickly as possible; it's about helping a person feel safe enough for their system to settle.

What Co-Regulation Can Look Like

- A calm, steady tone of voice, even when the moment feels chaotic.
- Getting down to eye level and slowing your own body language and breathing.
- Naming what you notice without judgement: 'This feels really big right now, I'm here.'
- Offering presence and quiet company rather than immediately problem-solving or instructing.
- Reducing sensory and social demands in the moment, rather than adding more instructions.

Looking After Your Own Regulation

Co-regulation relies on the adult's own nervous system being reasonably settled first, it's genuinely hard to lend calm you don't have. Noticing your own stress signals, taking brief resets where possible, and asking for support when you need it isn't a failure, it's part of what makes co-regulation sustainable for parents, carers, and professionals alike.

Where OT Fits In

Occupational therapists can work with families and individuals to understand regulation patterns, build co-regulation strategies suited to the specific person and environment, and gradually support the development of self-regulation skills over time, at a pace that fits the person, not a generic timeline.

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