

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is our ability to maintain or modify our state of arousal so that it matches the task or situation in hand. As the term implies, we self-regulate independently, without the aid or support of another person. Most of us self-regulate our arousal levels over the course of the day with no conscious thought or effort. In the morning when we wake up, we **up-regulate** to bring ourselves from a low arousal state (sleep) to our **Just Right State** so we can respond adaptively to the different tasks and situations that we encounter over the course of the day. At bed time, we do calming activities that help us to **down-regulate** to a low arousal state where we are ready for sleep. A child's capacity for self-regulation is intimately connected to their experience of **co-regulation**. The transfer of regulation from external (relying on caregivers' co-regulation) to internal (developing the capacity to self-regulate) is seen as the core task of a child's early development. Once the capacity to self-regulate has been developed, we rely on a combination of self- and co-regulation in order to remain in the Just Right State. The capacity to move towards self-regulation is critical to our ability as individuals to process our environment and distinguish between real and perceived threats, thereby allowing us to develop impulse control and hence self-control. It is important to recognise that a child who is dysregulated is outside their Just Right State and may therefore perceive threat in the environment where there is none – a neutral or even benign interaction may be interpreted and responded to as a threat. It follows that a child who has experienced poor or no experience of

co-regulation with their caregivers will have potentially considerable difficulty with self-regulation, and so also with impulse control and self-control. The loss of self-regulatory capacity may be a consequence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or traumatic stress, whilst failure to develop self-regulatory capacity may be related to having ACEs or sensory, attachment or social interaction difficulties. Lack of self-regulatory capacity brings in its train lack of healthy function in a range of biological, psychological, physiological and social processes. Children with additional learning needs often experience difficulties with self-regulation and, when distressed, will rely on compassionate understanding, validation and co-regulatory support from attachment figures and care-givers in order to return to their Just Right State.