

How Parenting Supports Biological Self-Regulation

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by John Hoffman

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt your energy, emotions, thinking skills, social skills, and the ability to care about others according to the needs of a situation or problem.

Biological (i.e., physiological) self-regulation is the ability to adapt your state of arousal (physical energy, calmness, alertness, excitement, etc.) according to the requirements of the situation you are dealing with.

We can't always control our states of arousal. If you are crossing the street and a speeding car comes at you, your brain makes you jump out of the way without thinking. When something terrible happens, you can't really make yourself not be upset.

But people can learn to manage their states of biological arousal. It starts with basic self-care skills: getting enough sleep, eating good food, and taking care of your health, as well as the various strategies we use to help ourselves do things like calm down or "get up" for a challenge. Here are some examples.

- Stepping back and taking a deep breath in a frustrating or upsetting situation
- Re-energizing yourself with some exercise, yoga, or a power nap
- Soaking away your tension in a hot bath
- Going to bed early before a challenging day

Young children have almost no ability to consciously regulate or manage their state of arousal. Babies and toddlers do start to develop ways of making themselves "feel better inside," by sucking their thumbs or pacifiers, holding a parent's hand, or clinging to a stuffed toy or blanket. But for the most part they need to be cared for by adults in ways that support their biological regulation.

Did you know, for example, that infants are more able to regulate their breathing and body temperature when they are in physical contact with Mom or Dad? And think of the simple act of "kissing it better," when a child hurts himself. It doesn't actually stop the hurt. But it often helps, doesn't it? Why? Kissing it better helps the child regulate. He knows Dad or Mom understands he's hurt, cares about it and will do whatever it takes to help. That makes him feel a little better inside because it relieves his mental and emotional distress. Thus, he doesn't have to deal with fear and distress along with the pain.

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Being regulated in these sorts of ways by parents and caregivers not only helps children in the moment, it gives them experiences that will gradually help them learn to regulate themselves.

Here are some ways you can promote the development of your children's biological self-regulation skills.

- Care for children by comforting them when they are upset, making sure they are clean, comfortably dressed, and by providing reasonably nutritious food when they are hungry.
- Make sure children get enough physical activity and sleep.
- Provide daily routines that make children's lives more predictable and help them feel more secure.
- Help children "wind down" by helping them move from active, exciting activities to quieter ones.
- Relieve the stress of too much quiet/inactive time (like a long car ride) by building in breaks where they can be active.
- Tune in to the kinds of situations and stimulation which can overload or over stimulate different children.
- Stay calm when children are upset or over-excited so they don't become even more upset or excited.
- Help children to tell when their "internal engine" is running "just right" (calmly focused, alert) or when it's running "too fast" (overexcited, hyperactive) or "too slow" (low energy, withdrawn), and what to do about it.

With these kinds of supports, children's ability to regulate their state of arousal develops very gradually throughout childhood. However, their need to be regulated from outside at times will continue throughout adolescence and even into adulthood.

Helping Children Deal with Stress

One very important aspect of biological self-regulation is learning how to deal with stress. Stress is part of life. A certain amount of it is inevitable and even good for us. But too much stress can interfere with the brain's ability to help a child adapt his or her state of biological and physical arousal to the demands of various situations. Learning to recognize stress, avoid stressors when possible, and manage and recover from stress that can't be avoided are crucial self-regulation skills.

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Parents can help by

- Recognizing that children have stress too and that stress affects their behaviour
- Developing and maintaining strong parent–child relationships so children know they have someone to go to when they are feeling stress
- Avoiding or removing children from overly stressful situations in some cases. This is not always possible, of course
- Helping children recover from stress by comforting them or “shepherding” them from stressful situations to non-stressful ones