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Growing Edge Training online journal



Engaging the Mind for Self-Regulation

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Timmy is a high school student who is autistic and nonverbal. One day, while working in a classroom with other students, he started to become overwhelmed and anxious by the busyness and increased noise level produced by the other students. Recognizing his growing anxiety by the look on his face and the varied movements of his body, Mary, his aide, approached him and invited him to take a walk through the hallway. He went with her and became more upset and dysregulated as they exited the classroom. She walked him through the hallway and around a corner toward a quiet back section of the building. Mary talked with him in a soothing voice for a few moments. She then pulled a small bottle of bubbles out of her pocket and started blowing bubbles. Immediately his attention and his focus went to watching the bubbles float through the air. His body began to slow down; his sensory system started to become regulated. He smiled and reached for the bubbles floating around him. Mary continued for a few more moments, and he smiled, watched, and reached. Then, Mary handed the wand to Timmy encouraging him to blow bubbles. His initial attempt was awkward. No bubbles were produced. Because his body had already started to become regulated, his inability to create his own bubbles did not upset him. Mary simply dipped the wand into the solution and carefully modeled how to take a deep breath and blow lightly to produce bubbles. After modeling one time, she dipped the wand and offered it to Timmy as an invitation to try again. This time Timmy imitated her and was able to successfully blow his own bubbles. Mary and Timmy repeated this pattern, and the smile on his face and excitement in his body grew with his success. As she observed Timmy becoming regulated, Mary paused for a moment and asked him if he was ready to go back to the classroom. Timmy thought for a moment, then signed, "No." He was not ready yet and pointed for more bubbles. Mary respected his request, and they continued blowing bubbles together. Timmy blew bubbles a few more times before Mary paused again and asked him if he was ready. This time Timmy thought for a moment and signed, "Yes." With that, they both walked back to the classroom. Timmy's body was calm as he went, and he wore a smile of confidence and competence.

It is through our interpersonal relationships and experiences that we begin to learn self-regulation.

Emotions are central to our ability to self-regulate. As Daniel Siegel (2017) states, our emotions function as "central organizers" which can be both regulated and regulating. It is through our interpersonal relationships and experiences that we begin to learn self-regulation.

Self-regulation is most effectively taught after moments of dysregulation. Contrary to most practices, it is not a concept that can be taught preemptively or with only verbal, direct instruction. In neurotypical development, children learn self-regulation by watching adults, observing and listening to how they regulate their own emotional states and the actions they produce according to specific situations (Stern, 2002). It is a skill that is best taught through observation and modeling. Adults can best contribute to self-regulation development by addressing it

with children after the moment occurs, not before or during the heightened event. When children begin to learn these skills of self-regulation naturally in reflection, they are better able to carry it over into different aspects of their lives. For some children, including those who are neurotypical yet impacted by trauma and those with a developmental disability, these skills are simply not learned this way. They require a more mindful approach to developing strategies for self-regulation. If programs try to teach children about self-regulation through words and descriptions only, oftentimes, they are not able to understand what all the words and descriptions mean. Depending on their age, children may not have the complex emotional vocabulary necessary to comprehend or change their actions appropriately in order to comply with verbal instructions. Children may also lack the valuable life experiences necessary to make a strong connection between their minds, their selves, and their bodies in order to execute appropriate self-regulation. And lastly, it must be remembered that it takes average humans until the age of early adulthood to be able to fully and completely regulate emotions appropriately (Cozolino, 2014). As stated above, the most effective way to teach self-regulation to children is through observation and modeling. All the tools and skills taught to children through The MInD Development Approach are derived from traditional developmental psychology and can be used with children struggling with emotional and self-regulation

(Altrup, 2016). The MInD Development Approach is a "developmental processing model" designed to facilitate necessary and crucial learning experiences young people need to build foundations for successful lives. All aspects of the approach are based on cognitive/thinking processes rather than expected skills or outcomes. By focusing on mindful learning, we open the door to an infinite amount of possibilities supporting the continuous attention that life requires, which results in steady growth over time.

In the opening example, Mary began with a quiet, soothing voice, the kind we might use to calm a small child who is upset. After just a few moments, she transitioned to a non-verbal intervention that not only attracted Timmy's attention but also engaged him in an action that allowed his mind to become regulated.

To teach self-regulation naturally, the first step is to focus on children's co-regulation skills. Studies show we use our relationships with others to help ourselves regulate (Siegel, 2012). Being able to emotionally attune with another person is integral to the process of co-regulation. When we attune or adjust our internal states to be the same as the internal state of another person, we are engaging in the initial process of self-regulation. We need to feel the emotions of the other person, as well as be able to use our own emotions, to impact our regulatory responses. If we want to help someone calm down, we need to be the calm presence for that person. Positive interactions elicit positive interactions. Negative interactions can produce an abundance of negative emotions within ourselves. Understanding this mirroring of emotions and its place in development is a game changer when teaching self-regulation.

While you work to establish a coregulatory relationship with children, you are also assessing what self-regulation strategies children are physically capable of doing. The first strategy everyone should know and teach to children is their ability to calm themselves through breathing techniques. This is one of the most regulatory practices for our sensory systems and our emotional brains. Children, even those with developmental disabilities or those impacted by trauma, have the ability to breathe and can use this technique to their benefit. This is why it was one of the first strategies used with Timmy. Mary was able to calm him simply with a breathing exercise. When beginning to teach children, it is imperative that all strategies are practiced alongside them. First, we model how

to do the strategy while they observe us. If the children are able to understand what we are doing by watching us do it, they will begin to feel competent enough to practice it on their own, while still alongside us for support. Lastly, we practice these skills together so the children can see what we are doing while they are feeling their own bodies engage in the same motions. This is how self-regulation becomes a mindful process. We are using the mirror neurons in the brain to aid in developing self-regulation (Carter, 2010). Timmy and Mary had practiced breathing exercises in fun, engaging ways prior to this event. Because of this previous experience, Timmy was able to dial into Mary's model of self-regulation and focus his attention on her.

Only when children have practiced their own unique set of self-regulation strategies and have felt themselves to be productive in the execution of the actions, can these skills be transferred into heightened moments of dysregulation. There are two opportunities to be effective in helping children implement their learned strategies. First, adults must be attuned and attentive enough to recognize children's dysregulation at its onset and respond accordingly. This is what Mary was able to do in the above story. Because of her strong relationship with Timmy and her willingness to learn to be attuned to his emotional reactions, she perceived Timmy's signs of dysregulation before he became out of control. The second opportunity for optimal input to guide self-regulation is after the moment of dysregulation has already happened. It is best to wait until children have worked through their emotional processes, have recovered, and are calm. It is during these "after moments" that children's minds are ready to engage in any learning conversations or strategies.

Attunement with children's emotional states is a vital first step in being able to recognize and understand regulated versus dysregulated movements.

The regulatory engagement between Timmy and Mary lasted approximately five minutes. The more often self-regulation strategies are practiced, the better the brain becomes at processing that information, resulting in children's abilities to repair and become regulated at a faster pace.

There are several key points we must keep in mind when beginning to teach self-regulation strategies to children. Adults need to be constantly observing children's nonverbal actions and reactions throughout the day. Attunement with children's emotional states are a vital first step in being able to recognize and understand regulated versus dysregulated movements.

Adults should be aware of each child's unique set of self-regulation strategies and be able to implement them at any time they notice the child becoming anxious or uncertain. I often call this the child's "bag of tricks." This "bag of tricks," or unique set of strategies, is necessary for anyone trying to teach a mindfulness-based approach to self-regulation. There are several tried and true self-regulation strategies humans use to help our bodies stay regulated throughout the day. These are the first tools put into a child's "bag of tricks."

1. Walking—The simple movement of walking puts our sensory system at ease. Engaging in a walk with another person who is calm and regulated helps the internal energy states between two people become aligned. Mary and Timmy left the classroom just briefly, but this coordinated movement of walking was her first step toward decreasing his anxiety and assisting him with self-regulation.

2. Breathing—Research shows the more deep breaths we take, the better our bodies learn to self-regulate (Willard & Saltzman, 2015). As previously stated, this should be one of the first tools we teach students. Pairing a breathing exercise with an engagement activity helps children's minds start to focus on something else, besides the internal chaos they are feeling.

3. Engaging in simple actions/movements of the body—This is a very effective way to draw the mind into something productive. If the mind focuses too long on the internal emotion causing the dysregulation, it will be more difficult to self-regulate. Finding simple activities such as yoga stretches and poses or rolling a ball allows the body to focus its attention on something other than the emotional state. It is at this point when we begin to practice mind/body integration (Willard & Saltzman, 2015). If the body starts to engage in a pattern of movement that is very simple, the mind is then able to start moving its thoughts away from dysregulation to regulation. In the story of Timmy and Mary, simply dipping the wand into the bubble mixture, pulling it out, and holding it

up were simple actions with simple movements which allowed Timmy's body to engage without becoming more stressed or anxious. Simple actions and movements align the mind with the body so they can begin working together and regulating together.

The most important concept we need to understand when minds and bodies become overwhelmed or overloaded with information is this: When the mind engages with and focuses on ONE thing, the body will naturally start to slow down and become calm and regulated. In the story above, Mary was able to help Timmy regulate his body by focusing on something as simple as watching bubbles float through the air. This streamlined attention allowed Timmy to move from dysregulation and overwhelmed feelings onto something that was simple, easily available, and regulatory. When children stop hyper-focusing on internal feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, or fear, they can actually remove that emotion out of the sensory system.

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One of the most valuable tools and strategies we have as educators is to teach children about self- and emotional regulation. Providing opportunities for minds to refocus attention on alternative engagements will consequently help bodies learn to self-regulate.

These same strategies can be successful for children at any age-level. The specific actions and tools used may be different based on the children's cognitive abilities, but the core foundations for all children are still the same.

Finally, it is integral we remember this crucial piece of learning self-regulation. The foundations of regulation cannot be effectively learned by oneself. We need trusted relationships with other people for guidance and support. Infants are dependent on their caregivers to calm and soothe them (Stern, 2002). As they grow, children become less dependent on their caregivers for their calming and regulation needs (Porges, 2011). Over time, they learn to imitate their emotional regulation

levels based on observing their caregivers (Baylin & Hughes, 2016). Unfortunately, many children may not naturally or independently learn appropriate emotional regulation during their early years of life. Or they may simply be missing some important milestones within their emotional development, which in turn, may manifest itself into a form of behavioral dysregulation. Whatever the cause, it is possible to use the natural, foundational concepts of self-regulation to provide new experiences for children so they can learn adequate emotional and self-regulation at any age.

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