

CORONAVIRUS SELF-REGULATION AND CO-REGULATION

Dear parent/carer

The past few months has seen all of us living in uncertain times and we may naturally have found ourselves experiencing an underlying sense of anxiety and fear, as well as other difficult and conflicting emotions. With the additional stresses of homeschooling and struggling to find time for ourselves, we thought it would be helpful to share some reminders of ways to best cope together.

When we are feeling tired or emotionally drained and our children challenge us, we might find that our patience wears thin. We may tip over the edge and react to our children and possibly say words or behave in ways that we regret later. Most of us feel that we mainly have no choice in how we respond to situations and will behave reactively.

Self-regulation is the ability to direct our thoughts, emotions and behaviours and to manage our emotional impulses, which allows us to take a more active part in our emotional experience. We're not born with these skills but, thankfully, it is never too late to relearn and strengthen our self-regulation.

Children's brains are different to those of adults, as the front part of their brain (which helps with rational thinking and controlling impulses) is not fully developed. When disagreements arise, it is more natural for children to react emotionally and they will mirror how we are behaving towards them. This is why shouting at our children, when we feel they are not following instruction or listening to us, can often result in them shouting back. We soothe our children as babies when they cry, which helps them with regulating their emotions right from the beginning. Infants are dependent on a caregiver to help them understand the emotions and sensations in their body, to make sense of what they are experiencing and to learn how to self-soothe. Imagine the all-consuming feeling of anger or stress in that little body! This is the act of co-regulating. Co-regulation is using warm responses to support and model to children how to understand and express their feelings in healthy ways.

If we were not always modelled or taught how to self-regulate during childhood then, as an adult, we will have trouble regulating emotions ourselves, which makes it harder to support our own children in this process. With the power of self-regulation, we can create space to be emotionally available for our children and use co-regulation to help them build up their tolerance and ability to manage difficult feelings. Feeling uncomfortable emotions is a normal part of life, so showing our children how to manage and not be afraid of these feelings when they arise, is an invaluable skill that we can teach them.

Just as flying on an airplane, when you are told to put your oxygen mask on before helping others, we need to be able to regulate ourselves before we support our children in learning how to deal with their emotions.

Remember, we are all human and sometimes our emotions will get the better of us, even more so during stressful and apprehensive times. Practising small steps can help us be more in control and empowered in how we respond to what we feel. In turn, we can model this and support our children to do the same.

You are doing the best you can in these never-known-before times. Be kind to yourselves as we emerge towards a new sense of normal.

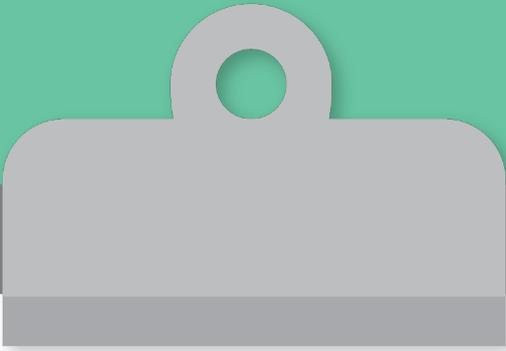
Take care.

The Unravel Team

The logo for 'unravel' is written in a lowercase, rounded, teal-colored font. The letters are connected and have a soft, hand-drawn appearance.

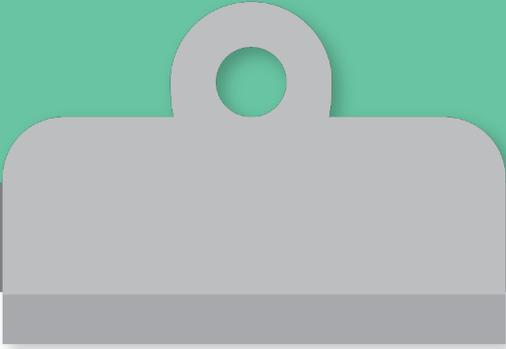
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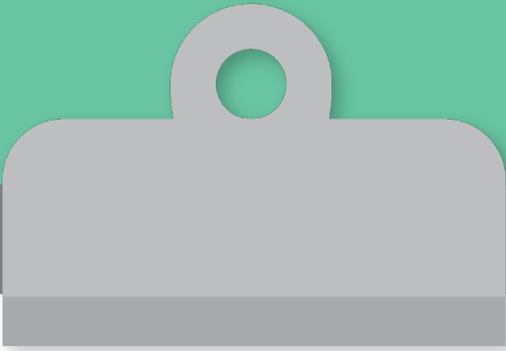
PRACTISING SELF-REGULATION AND HELPING OUR CHILDREN CO-REGULATE

- ✔ Notice the cues in your body. We don't always stop and pause to notice what is going on inside of our body, but this is a great way to ground ourselves and feel present in the moment. Pay attention to the physiological sensations such as your heart rate and your breath. The more we practise this, the more the sensations become clues that something is happening and will allow us to make new choices. If we consciously notice these changes and recognise the emotion we are feeling, e.g. sad or angry, we can create space to choose a new response instead of automatically reacting, e.g. "This is what I always do when I'm angry - I scream or shout".
- ✔ Search for the emotion behind the behaviour. All behaviour is a form of communication. If your child is yelling or screaming, help them label the underlying emotion. Labelling our emotions helps us accept, understand and move through it quicker. Remember our emotions are not our enemies, they are messengers to tell us there is something we need. Be an emotional explorer, not an emotional judge.
- ✔ Practise deep belly breathing. Our breath is a powerful tool for regulating our nervous system. Through habit, we don't often pay attention to our breathing and for most of us we breathe shallow and quickly, without even noticing. Breathing from our belly might feel weird at first but by practising one deep belly breath a day, and then building up from this, will train your body and put you into a more calm and rested state. Practise this for yourself and with your child.



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- ✔ Normalise the feelings. Let your children (and yourself) know that whatever you are feeling is valid. It is natural for us to want to change difficult feelings of sadness and rush in to take it away but remember, whatever you are feeling is okay. Be gentle on yourself and allow yourself to feel it!
- ✔ Journal. If an uncomfortable feeling comes up and is hard to regulate, take a moment to write it down or draw it. The process of getting the feeling out of our mind and onto paper helps us to release the intensity of the emotion and provides space to think before reacting. Encourage your children to start doing this, to help them understand their own experiences. You could even do this together, as an evening activity, as a way of connecting.
- ✔ Hold space for your children's emotions and let them know that you can help them handle "big" emotions. Remind them that they are safe. Simple words and reminders of, "I see you, I hear you, I've got you" go a long way.
- ✔ Hug it out! When feelings get too overwhelming and situations are getting heightened, hug it out. Connect to your child with love. Hugging someone for at least 20 seconds reduces the stress hormone (cortisol) and increases levels of the love hormone (oxytocin). This reduces blood pressure to help improve relationships and connection with others. Save the talking for later, when everyone is regulated and calm.



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- ✔ Use and encourage curiosity. Openly explore yours and your children's emotions together and remind your child that no feeling is "bad". This helps them understand and be able to manage feelings with less resistance.

- ✔ Practise mindfulness techniques. Mindfulness is about being engaged in the present moment and being aware of our thoughts and feelings, without judging them. This has been proven to have a positive and regulating effect on the nervous system. An effective example you can use, and teach your children to use, is a technique which can be used anywhere. The grounding technique uses our senses to help us become physically and mentally present:
 - 5 things you can see. Fully notice the colours, textures, shape and, engage your eyes

 - 4 things you can feel. Fully feel the texture, details, material and engage your body

 - 3 things you can hear. Fully hear each sound, is it loud? Quiet? Unexpected? Continuous?

 - 2 things you can smell. Fully breathe in and notice what is in the air around you

 - 1 good thing about yourself. Name one good thing about you (even though there are so many)

CORONAVIRUS

**TOGETHER WE CAN
BEAT IT**

**Please keep yourselves
and your children safe**

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Experts in children & young people's
emotional well-being