

Co-Regulation Before Self-Regulation

Children borrow an adult's calm before they can build their own. Four principles for the moment a learner becomes dysregulated.

Regulate yourself first

Your nervous system sets the ceiling. Slow your breathing and lower your voice before you say anything about behaviour.

In class: Two slow breaths at the desk before walking over. Quiet voice, side-on stance, below eye level.

Connect before you correct

Name what you see and offer safety. The thinking brain comes back online when the child feels noticed, not judged.

In class: I can see something has made this feel too big. I am staying right here with you.

Notice affect, behaviour AND thinking

Teachers who only respond to the behaviour miss the emotion driving it. Ask yourself what feeling sits underneath.

In class: The ripped worksheet is the behaviour. The feeling is probably I cannot do this in front of everyone.

Hand regulation back gradually

As children steady, swap doing it for them for prompting them. Match support to the child, not the incident.

In class: From breathe with me, towards what helped you last time? as their skills grow.

Co-Regulation Strategy Cards

Four scripted moves for adults. Keep one set in the calm corner and one in the staff room.

Observe and wait

Pause before intervening. Scan for the trigger and the feeling, not just the behaviour.

Say: "What is this behaviour telling me?"

Name and validate

Label the feeling without agreeing to the behaviour. Validation is not permission.

Say: "That felt unfair and you are allowed to feel cross."

Anchor with your calm

Slow voice, slow breath, still body. Offer co-breathing or counting only once the child can hear you.

Say: "Breathe with me. In for three, out for four."

Reflect afterwards

Once calm, revisit briefly. Build the child's own plan for next time, one strategy only.

Say: "What helped? What shall we try first next time?"

My Calm Choices

A learner-facing card for the desk or calm corner. Practise each choice when calm, so it is there when feelings get big.

BODY

Take 3 slow breaths

In through your nose for three, out through your mouth for four. Do it three times.

Try saying: I am blowing out birthday candles, slowly.

FOCUS

Count something

Count five things you can see, four you can hear, three you can touch.

Try saying: Five things I can see... the clock, the door...

BODY

Squeeze and release

Squeeze your fists or a stress ball for five seconds, then let go slowly. Twice.

Try saying: Squeeze... and let it go like sand.

HELP

Ask for a person

Some feelings are too big to shrink alone. Tell an adult you need a minute with them.

Try saying: I need help to feel calm.

A Co-Regulating Classroom Environment

Audit your room and routines. Tick what is in place; pick ONE unticked item to change this half-term.

Physical environment

- There is a predictable calm space a learner can use without it being a punishment.

- Visual timetable is up to date and referred to at transitions.

- Sensory load is managed: displays near the calm space are minimal and lighting is soft.

- Regulation tools (timer, breathing card, fidget) live in one known place.

Adult behaviour and routines

- Adults use an agreed quiet script for dysregulation, so responses are consistent.

- Transitions are signalled before they happen, not announced as they happen.

- One adult stays anchored with the dysregulated child; another holds the class.

- Reflection happens after calm returns, never during the storm.

Teaching regulation, not just managing it

- Calm-down strategies are taught and practised when everyone is calm.

- Learners have their own short list of what works for them.

- Praise names the regulation move, not just the compliance.

Co-Regulation: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What the research behind this toolkit says, and where the evidence is still developing.

■ Co-regulation builds self-regulation

Classroom observation studies link teachers' in-the-moment co-regulation to children's self-regulation, with effective adults adjusting support to the child's developmental level rather than the size of the incident.

● Attend to feeling, behaviour and thinking together

Video analysis of real classrooms shows teacher attention spans affect, behaviour and cognition. Responding to behaviour alone narrows the response and misses the driver.

■ Taught strategies work, modestly

Across 50 randomised trials, self-regulation programmes show a pooled effect size of 0.42. Curriculum-based, routinely practised approaches were the most consistent; one-off interventions were not.

■ Why it is worth the time

Childhood self-regulation predicts later achievement, social competence and mental health across 150 studies. The honest caveat: most classroom co-regulation evidence is observational and early-years based, so treat scripts as starting points and watch your own learners.

Evidence base

Silkenbeumer, J., Schiller, E.-M. and Kaertner, J. (2018). Co- and self-regulation of emotions in the preschool setting. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

Kostol, E.M.F. (2025). Teachers' co-regulation in classrooms: a video-based analysis of teachers' foci of attention in emotional situations. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*.

Pandey, A. et al. (2018). Effectiveness of universal self-regulation-based interventions in children and adolescents. *JAMA Pediatrics*.

Robson, D.A., Allen, M.S. and Howard, S.J. (2020). Self-regulation in childhood as a predictor of future outcomes: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*.