

Tips for Co-Regulating with Your Children

by John Hoffman

One very important social skill for children to develop is learning how people work together to help each other feel OK. For example, groups of children often get each other excited before an event they are looking forward to such as a school field trip, or may help each other be brave before a stressful event such as getting an immunization shot. Psychologists call this co-regulating. One of the most important places children learn about co-regulation is in family interactions. Here are some things you can do to help.

Model co-regulation at home. Comfort your children when they need it. Support them to be patient, brave, and focused when necessary. For example, if you have to wait in line with a four-year-old, don't just tell him to be patient, hold his hand and help him wait by telling him a story, starting a conversation about something he's interested in, or even giving him a little mint or some sugarless gum, if necessary. On the flip side, tell your children when you need their support and acknowledge their efforts by saying things like, "I'm having a hard time right now. I really need you to do something quietly by yourself for a few minutes." Or, "Thanks for playing with the baby while I got our picnic packed up. I was a bit stressed out with everything there was to do, and that really helped."

Ask them how they are feeling. Children (and people in general) don't always want to share exactly how they feel. But asking children how they feel in situations where you think they need your support teaches them the importance of understanding the feelings and moods of others.

Use humour to break tension. People often use humour as a co-regulation tool. The right joke at the appropriate time can often ease tension and help your children get back into a better mood.

Back off when necessary. We often feel the need to solve conflicts as quickly as possible, but when people are really upset our best efforts can sometimes just make things worse. Children need to learn that sometimes you need to give people a break before trying to work out a problem or conflict with them.