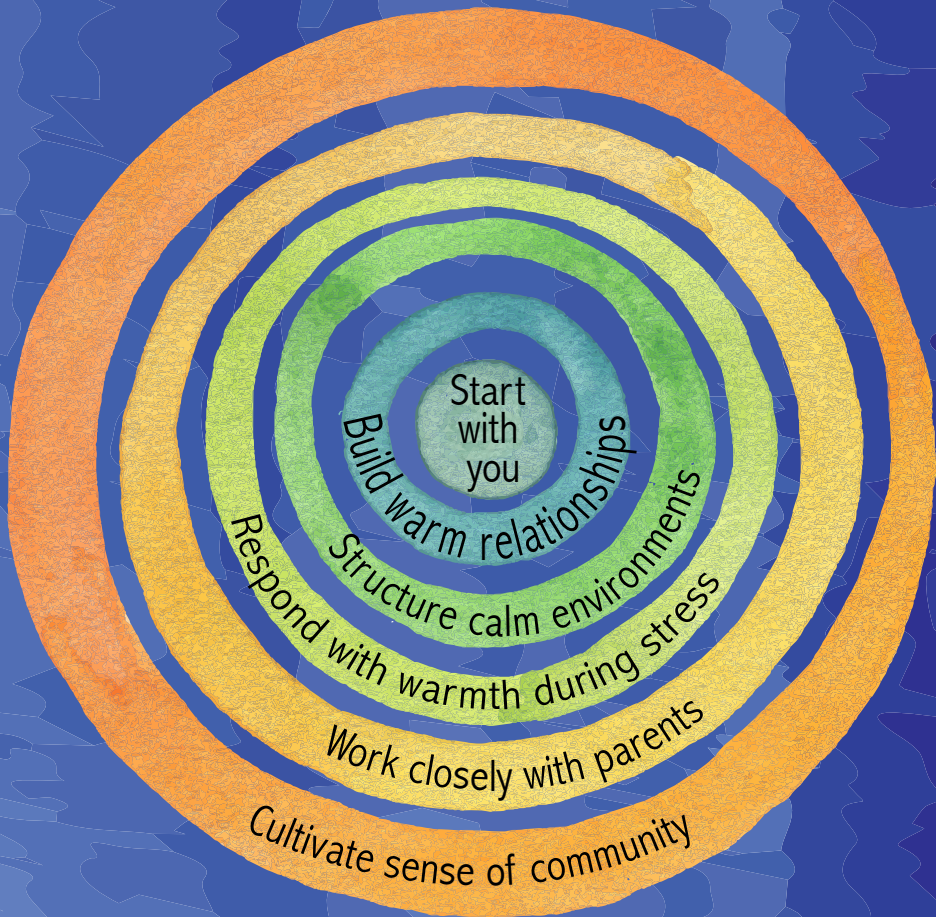


Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation in Young Children



Tips for Practitioners Working with Toddlers in Classroom Settings



Toddlers (1-2 years old)

Toddlers are rapidly developing movement and language abilities that help them interact with their surroundings. They may go through changes from infant to toddler care settings, or from younger to older toddler childcare rooms, which bring new people, new schedules, and new expectations. They depend on adults as a source of comfort and safety, particularly during times of transition or distress. Toddlers begin to use basic self-regulation skills, such as focusing their attention and adjusting their behavior to reach goals. They can also learn how to wait for short periods and use simple words to tell others what they need. Their ability to follow rules and directions is limited, and they need external structure and support to be able to control their impulses and calm down when upset. Positive relationships with caregivers are essential for cultivating emerging self-regulation skills. This document provides tips to help caregivers use co-regulation to promote self-regulation skill development in toddlers. Program administrators may wish to view practice briefs that describe [self-regulation development in early childhood](#) and [co-regulation from birth to young adulthood](#) in more detail. In addition, this [snapshot](#) summarizes key self-regulation concepts and interventions, and may be helpful for practitioners working with toddlers.

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions. The development of self-regulation begins at birth and continues into young adulthood and beyond.

6 Co-regulation Tips for Working with Toddlers

1
2
3
4
5
6

Start with you. We all feel stressed at times, and caregiving can be demanding. Practice self-care and effective stress management to enhance your own well-being and resilience in the classroom.

Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each child.

Optimal self-regulation development in children occurs in the context of positive relationships. Develop a warm relationship with every child to create a strong and essential foundation for your co-regulation practices.

Create calm and structured childcare environments.

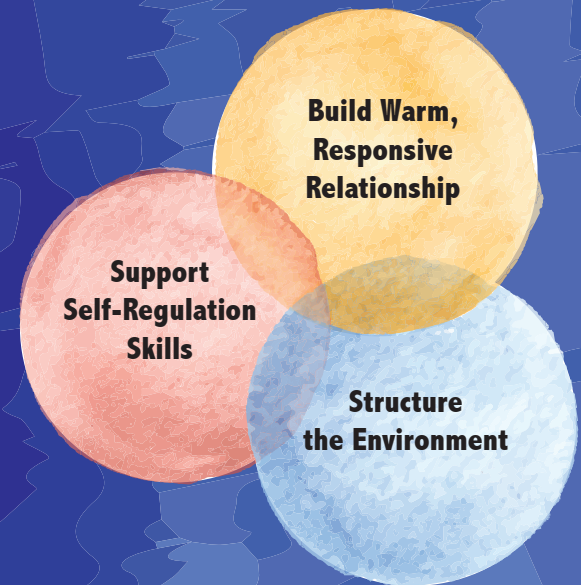
Toddlers will experience moments of frustration and distress in any normal day. You can prevent and buffer some of this by creating calm, predictable, and homelike environments.

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments. Children need the most co-regulation support when they are upset and unable to regulate their own emotions. You can promote self-regulation development by staying warm and responsive while you help them calm down.

Work closely with parents. Self-regulation development is influenced by home and childcare environments. Engage with parents to learn about their efforts at home and to support self-regulation development across settings.

Cultivate a sense of community. Social environments can shape individual behaviors and relationships. Encourage and facilitate positive interactions between children to support healthy social development and to lay groundwork for future peer relationships.

Co-regulation is the warm, responsive interactions and support, structure, coaching and modeling provided by caregivers to foster self-regulation development in children.



***Self-regulation
development***

***begins at birth
and continues into
young adulthood and beyond.***

***Co-regulation
from caregivers***

***is important for
optimal self-regulation
development.***

***Caregivers can use the tips provided
within this document to support
the specific self-regulation skills
developing at each age.***

Toddlers

Toddlers can use self-regulation skills to begin to manage their behaviors.

For example, toddlers can:

- focus their attention and wait for brief periods
- begin to adjust their behavior to reach goals
- learn how to use simple words to tell others how they feel and to ask adults for help

Although self-regulation skills are growing, it is important to remember that toddlers need high levels of external structure and support to control their impulses and manage strong emotions.

Each of the 6 tips for co-regulation is detailed in the pages that follow.

1

Start with you.

Learn to recognize and manage your own stresses. See also these [Taking Care of Ourselves](#) guides for suggestions.

Take advantage of available support services to understand how your own feelings, experiences, and well-being influence your interactions with toddlers and their families.

Add mind-body activities to your daily routines. Simple activities, such as mindful breathing or yoga, can have big benefits.

Show the children what you do to calm down when you feel stressed or upset by describing your specific feelings and actions. For example, “I feel upset right now. I am going to take deep breaths to calm down.”

2

Establish a warm and responsive relationship with each child.

Use child-centered caregiving practices that involve giving positive attention and making descriptive comments while letting a child take the lead.

Respond warmly to a child’s cues with eye contact, reassuring words, or with physical affection to support development of social and emotional skills and build strong relationships.

Use play to strengthen your relationship with the children.

To learn more about the benefits of of warm and responsive caregiving, see this [overview of the Serve and Return concept](#).

Create calm and structured childcare environments.

Set up the classroom in ways that invite positive interactions, reduce stress and frustration, and provide a “home away from home” feeling. For example, create a “cozy corner” or calm down area, provide multiple copies of the same toys and books to reduce conflict, and ensure there is plenty of space for activities. Use natural light and cozy furniture and décor. See these [Tips for Teachers](#) for more suggestions.

Create predictable schedules and routines to give children a sense of security and so they know what to expect throughout the day. [Display pictures](#) that convey the day’s activities. See these [Tips for Teachers](#) and these [Visual Strategies](#) for more suggestions.

Establish simple rules and teach the children through repeated practice and by emphasizing appropriate behaviors (e.g., “Use gentle hands”). Prompt them to identify the rules, show them what following the rule looks like, and offer praise when they follow them.

Use pictures and signs to help children communicate. For example, you can give children simple signs or pictures they can use if they are not yet able to express their needs in words.

Anticipate children’s physical and emotional needs and attend to them before the child gets frustrated.

Notice individual personalities and behaviors, and **step in to help prevent or resolve** peer conflicts or other upsetting interactions with other children.



4

Respond with warmth and structure during stressful moments.

Redirect children's attention or actions away from challenging behaviors and help them make positive choices. See these [tips](#) for how you can redirect challenging behavior.

When setting limits, remember to maintain a warm relationship and use positive approaches to discipline. Provide emotional support while enforcing rules in a calm, consistent manner.

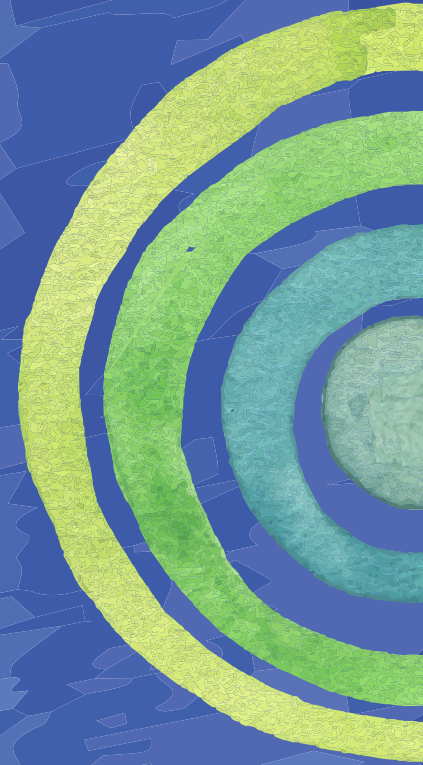
When a toddler is upset, respond quickly with empathy and physical comfort.

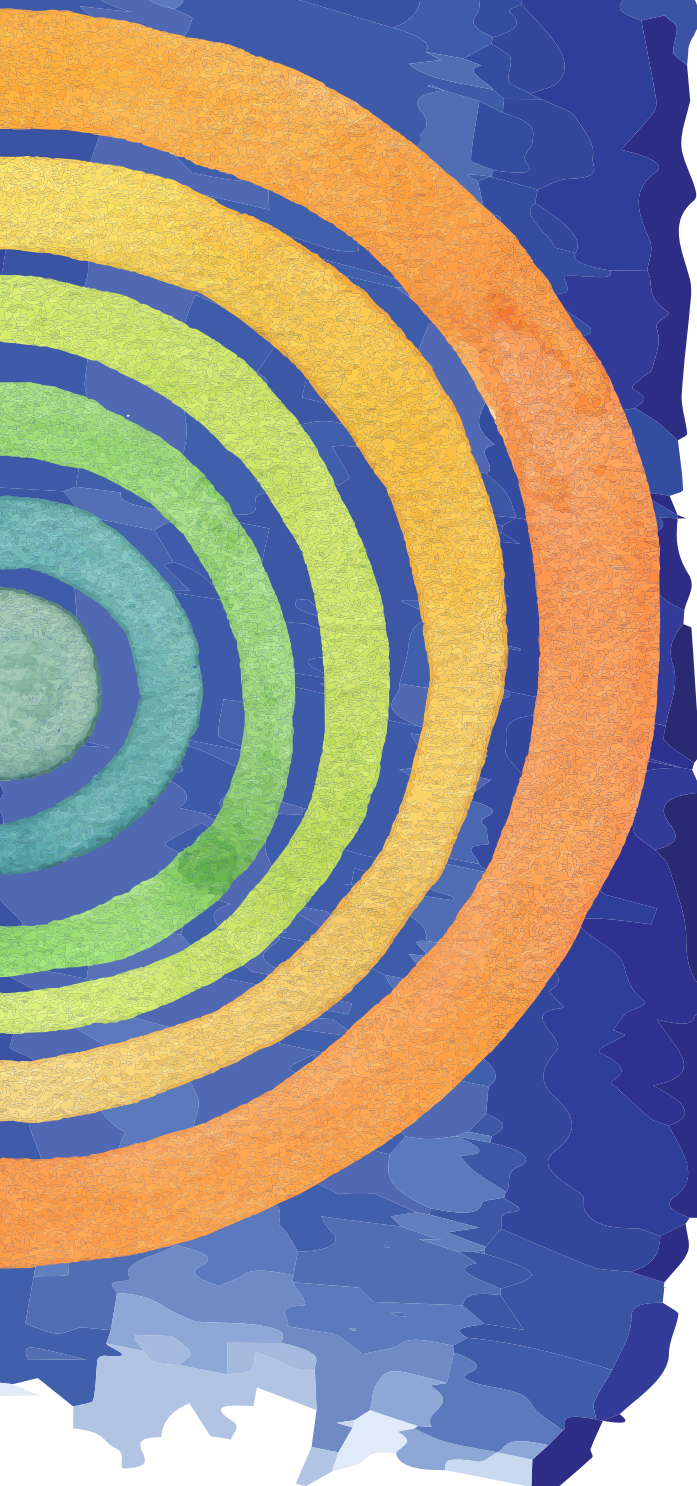
Give the children words to label their feelings and help them use those words to express how they feel. See [these ideas](#) for teaching children about emotions.

Help the children practice specific calm down skills like asking for a hug, getting a stuffed animal, taking a deep breath, or looking at a picture book.

Remove an upset child from stressful situations to a quiet area, if necessary, and continue to give comfort until they are calm. Minimize attention to inappropriate behaviors that may occur when the child is upset and redirect them towards positive behaviors and choices.

Notice and praise when a child uses words to express feelings and asks for what they want. For example, "I like how you used words to tell me you were upset, and then asked me for a stuffed animal to feel better."





Work closely with parents.

Talk with parents about the importance of actively helping their child regulate emotions and behaviors in the context of [warm, responsive parenting](#). Ask parents about strategies and routines that work at home, and offer ideas and explain the approaches you use with their child.

Create regular opportunities for parents and teachers to share experiences and to work together to help children develop their self-regulation skills.

Focus on the common goals you and the parents share for the child. Ongoing, two-way communication and understanding their perspectives will help you work together for the child's benefit.

Children and families living in stressful conditions may need extra support from home visiting or mental health services. Be familiar with program supports and other resources that are available to help you support them. Links to a few resources are provided at the end of this document.

Cultivate a sense of community.

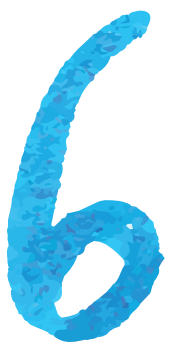
Create a caring classroom environment that reinforces a strong sense of community. For example, sing songs together or create special rituals that help the children feel connected with each other and the classroom. See these [tips](#) for other ways you can create a caring community.

Show kindness toward each child and [provide positive encouragement](#) to model social skills like using kind words and friendly behaviors.

Model respect and compassion in your relationships with other adults so toddlers can sense the positive emotions and can see examples of caring relationships.

Use play to promote peer relationships and social skills, which are important for self-regulation.

Identify and understand aggressive behaviors that are normative at this age, and help the children learn to be gentle with their friends. For example, this [Book Nook guide](#) provides stories and activities to help toddlers learn that teeth are for biting food, and we can kick things like balls, but that we cannot do these things to our friends.



**Additional web-based resources**

The following websites contain additional tools to support social and emotional self-regulation development in children, including many of the links embedded within the tips above. These links are intended to provide further examples, and represent a small selection of the many resources that are available to practitioners.

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#)

[Maryland Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(SEFEL\)](#)

[National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)

[Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#)

[Center on the Developing Child: Key Concepts: Serve and Return](#)

[Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\) Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#)

[Integrated Stage-Based Framework for Implementation of Early Childhood Programs and Systems](#)

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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Inclusion of links to other web-based resources throughout this document does not imply endorsement.

This is one of four early childhood practitioner tip sheets. Much of the content is based on the reports and briefs in the [Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports) (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports>) prepared for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) by the Duke Center for Family Policy and the UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.

