

Co-Regulation: How People Help Each Other Regulate

(page 1 of 2)

by John Hoffman

Social intelligence refers to the ability to understand, communicate with, and get along with other people. Children develop these skills very gradually by interacting with people, especially with parents and other loved ones.

One important aspect of social intelligence is what some experts call co-regulation, which refers to the way we respond and adapt to what someone else is saying and doing.

In order to function properly, people need to be able to regulate themselves, that is match their level of mental and emotional energy to the requirements of a situation, for example, to calm down after being upset, recover from stress, or find extra mental and physical energy for a challenging task.

One way people do this is by helping each other: by seeking support or energy from another person and by changing their own behaviour in ways that support or help someone else.

Have you ever noticed that when two dogs are play fighting and it gets too intense, they will stop suddenly and look away from each other? That is one way in which dogs co-regulate. They are changing their behaviour to keep their play fighting from getting out of control.

People do that, too. Co-regulation is a very sophisticated set of skills to learn, but you've probably seen your children co-regulating. Perhaps you've seen children getting each other excited about an upcoming activity, trying to help an upset friend feel better, or simply keeping quiet when they know you are upset. Our job as parents is to encourage and nurture those skills throughout childhood.

The single most important thing you can do as a parent is model good co-regulation skills. First of all, when your children have the repeated experience of having you understand their needs for support, comfort, and encouragement they learn the value of co-regulation over and over. They also learn from watching you co-regulate with other people, especially your partner (if you have one).

(page 2 of 2)

So, for example, if your partner is upset and you usually respond in ways that show you understand and adjust your behaviour and words in supportive ways, your children get a great lesson in co-regulation. The same thing happens when they see you drawing inspiration or support from others. Nobody does this perfectly, but hopefully your child won't see you often responding to people in ways that make them even more upset.

It also helps to talk to older children about these experiences: "That man was really upset today when he thought I butted into line. I didn't really butt in, but I could see he was very angry. So I just apologized and let him go in front of me. That way we didn't get into a big argument that would have made us both really upset."

It's also useful to point out to children situations in which they helped other people co-regulate. "I was really frustrated when I got home from work. Thank you for being quiet and cooperative. It really helped me to calm down."