

How Biological States Affect Children's Behaviour

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by John Hoffman

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt your energy, emotions, thinking skills, social skills, and the ability to care about others according to the needs of a situation or problem.

One important aspect of self-regulation is that it is biological (i.e., physical). It has to do with how the nervous system works to move people through different states of what psychologists call “arousal.” People experience various states of biological arousal—ranging from sleep at one end, to full-blown panic, rage, or tantrum at the other end, and everything in between. These states of arousal affect our mood, our level of energy, and our ability to function each day.


The state of arousal you are in can either help or hinder your ability to do certain tasks. For example, if you are playing a sport, you want to have a lot of physical energy and to feel excited and alert so you can play well and enjoy the game. But if you need to concentrate on an instructional manual for your new computer, you will do better if you are more calm and focused.

With respect to children and biological arousal, there are two important things to remember. First, they can't “regulate” (manage and change) their state of arousal as well as adults, so they need our help at times. You have undoubtedly already noticed this.

But what parents don't always realize is that a child's state of arousal, or the stress they sometimes experience from the effort it takes to adapt their state of arousal, often has a big impact on their behaviour.

- A child who comes home tired from a long day at school, upset because of something that happened that day, or drained due to the effort of trying to control his behaviour all day. He may be uncooperative, irritable, or aggressive as a result. He may need a snack or relaxing bath more than he needs to be told to “smarten up.”
- A child who is feeling unmotivated or seems to have no or low-energy will have trouble doing her homework or a task that requires mental energy and attention. Doing ten jumping jacks or going for a short bike ride with Mom or Dad might help her “gear up” for the task ahead.
- A child who has spent the whole evening playing a video game may have trouble winding down for sleep. Limiting or eliminating before-bed screen time may help him settle down.

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Children vary widely with respect to both their states of arousal and how their arousal affects their behaviour.

- Some children always seem to be revved up and have a hard time winding down.
- Some children are, by nature, quiet and calm most of the time and may have trouble “revving up” when a situation or task calls for enthusiasm and energy.
- Some children are very even-tempered and seem able to rev up or calm down as necessary with relative ease.

As parents we can't “make” our children be biologically well-regulated all of the time. For example, if your daughter seems hyperaroused most of the time, there is no magic trick to make her more like her easy-going cousin.

But what we *can* do is try to understand the child we have and what we can do to help him or her be more regulated when necessary. And very gradually, we can help our children learn to recognize and manage their own states of arousal.