

The Importance of Parental Self-Regulation

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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.

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to be a good parent when you are feeling good? Think about it. When you feel happy, relaxed, and rested it is easier to focus on your children and enjoy them. You are less likely to be upset by their behaviour and it's easier to stay calm and figure out what to do when something goes wrong. But when you are exhausted or all stressed out, it's much harder to be a patient, clever, resourceful parent.

In other words, when your self-regulation is in a good state you are more able to put your physical, psychological, and emotional energies to work to help you understand and respond to your children.

So, if you want to support and build self-regulation in your children, you need to look after it in yourself. Self-regulation is basically what is going on internally in your brain and body that either helps or interferes with doing your best in any given situation. Looking after your "parental self-regulation" starts with the basics of looking after yourself: eating well, getting enough rest and exercise. Here are four other ways to improve your parental self-regulation.

All Parents Need Support

They say it takes a village to raise a child. In part, that is a way of saying that children benefit from having a number of different people look out for them and care for them. But it also means that parents do a better job of parenting when they feel supported. That's just common sense. But it's also backed up by research. Studies have shown that when parents feel supported by their families, friends, neighbours, and communities, they tend to parent more effectively.

Social and practical support gives anyone a psychological boost. When we feel supported we feel less alone in our responsibilities and it is easier to find the courage and energy to meet challenges. So one of the smartest things you can do to help yourself be a good parent is to get as much social support as you can. That includes things like getting help and advice from grandparents and

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other relatives who care about you and your kids, spending time with other families, going to a parent–child drop-in program or support group, or even just having coffee with a friend to share the insights, challenges, and joys of raising children.

Work as a Team

If you are parenting in a couple, your partner is one of your biggest potential sources of support. So put time and effort into caring for your relationship and working as a team. Try not to undermine each other. Instead, work together to understand and sort out any parenting differences you have (and virtually all couples have differences of opinion about parenting). Watch for times when your partner needs a break or some extra support. Research also shows that effective parenting teamwork and partner support makes for better parents.

If you are a single parent, you can still parent very effectively. But, since you don't have a built-in parenting team, you may need to work a little harder to ensure you get all the support you need.

Learn About Child Development

One thing that can undermine a parent's self-regulation is lack of confidence or the anxiety that comes from being unsure how to respond when certain issues or behaviours arise. Learning about normal child development can help. Many of the behaviours that parents find annoying, frustrating, or puzzling are actually quite normal, and some of them go away on their own as children mature. Understanding normal childhood behaviour and how it changes doesn't necessarily solve all our parenting problems. But when you know a behaviour is normal, you can see it a little more positively. And that helps you stay in the positive frame of mind that helps you be the kind of parent you want to be.

You can learn about child development from books, magazine articles, and websites, and by talking to other parents about their children. Another great way to build your knowledge and confidence about parenting is to take a parenting course. Some people think parenting courses are only for "bad parents." Not so. They can be helpful for just about any parent. Parenting courses provide useful information about child development. They are also a way to connect with other parents and gain the enormously comforting lesson that most other moms and dads are going through the same struggles as you.

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Take Time for Yourself

Raising children is a hands-on, labour-intensive process. So parents need breaks. That can mean going out to dinner or a show with your spouse, going to the gym for a workout, meeting a friend for coffee, or setting aside regular “me time” for the activities you enjoy. The energy you gain from these little breaks can help you do a better job as a parent. And it’s just as important for you to be aware of what it feels like to be calm when you are starting to feel agitated as it is for your child.

Get Help If You Need It

If you feel you are having serious problems—with parenting, your own mental health, or an addiction—don’t hesitate to seek help. There are so many rich resources available in Canada that have been created to serve the needs of families. When you help yourself, you help your children too. Many parents need support with their personal problems in order to parent well. And many people who do get professional help with their personal problems wonder why they didn’t seek help a little sooner.