

# Co-Regulation Strategies to Soothe, Support, and Strengthen

Co-regulation is the process of supporting a child's ability to manage their emotions by gently guiding them through calming activities. Effective co-regulation begins with us. When we are calm and centred, we can lead by example and create a nurturing environment where children feel safe.

This guide outlines simple, actionable strategies to use alongside children during moments of distress.

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## General Principles for Effective Co-Regulation

### **Low Demands:**

Keep expectations minimal during moments of distress. Simplify instructions and allow the child to focus on regaining calm without feeling pressured.

### **Calm Voice & Body Language:**

Speak softly and use gentle, open gestures. Your calm tone and relaxed posture help signal that everything is okay.

### **Consistency:**

Maintain predictable routines and responses. Consistent practices build trust and help the child feel secure in knowing what to expect.

### **Validation & Empathy:**

Acknowledge the child's feelings without judgment. Simple affirmations like "I understand you're upset" can go a long way in making them feel heard.

### **Modelling Calmness:**

Remember, co-regulation starts with you. When you practice deep breathing or grounding techniques, you're showing the child a healthy way to manage emotions.

### **Flexibility:**

Be prepared to adjust your approach based on the child's needs at the time. Sometimes a quiet presence is more effective than verbal intervention.

### **Minimal Verbal Demands:**

When a child is highly dysregulated, reduce the need for extensive conversation. Use simple, repetitive phrases or non-verbal cues to offer comfort and guidance.

These principles create a supportive foundation, allowing both adults and children to work together toward calm and regulation.

## **Co-Regulation Strategies by Activity/Action Type**

Once you are steady, you can gently guide the child using different strategies. The following are organised by activity type with suggestions for you to try.

### **Breathing Strategies**

Breathing strategies help anchor the mind and body by reducing anxiety through the conscious regulation of the breath. When a child is overwhelmed, slow, deep breathing can lower their heart rate and ease physical symptoms of stress. By modelling these techniques and practising them together, adults show children a simple, tangible way to regain calm and build trust that regulation is possible.

#### **Try This:**

##### **Bubble Breaths:**

Pretend you're gently blowing bubbles—inhale slowly, then exhale as if sending out delicate bubbles.

##### **4-7-8 Breathing:**

Inhale for 4 seconds, hold the breath for 7 seconds, then exhale slowly for 8 seconds.

##### **Counting Breath:**

Breathe in while counting slowly to 3 or 4, and exhale with the same count.

##### **Visual Cue Breathing:**

Use a visual aid, like watching a small object move or a simple animation of a balloon inflating and deflating.

### **Grounding Strategies**

Grounding strategies reconnect a child with the present moment by engaging their senses. When anxiety disrupts clear thinking, these exercises shift focus from distressing thoughts to the tangible world around them. The adult's calm guidance during these activities reinforces a sense of safety and control.

#### **Try This:**

##### **5-4-3-2-1 Senses Game:**

Ask the child to name 5 things they can see, 4 they can touch, 3 they can hear, 2 they can smell, and 1 they can taste.

##### **Texture Touch:**

Provide a soft toy or textured fabric and invite the child to explore its feel.

##### **Colour Hunt:**

Encourage the child to find and name several colours in their environment.

##### **Sensory Box:**

Use a box filled with varied items (like a smooth stone, a fuzzy fabric, a scented item) for hands-on exploration.

## **Shared Calm Activities**

Shared calm activities create opportunities for connection without the pressure of direct conversation, which can be challenging during moments of high stress. By engaging in a parallel activity, adults provide a reassuring presence that helps the child slowly rebuild their capacity for calm and engagement.

### **Try This:**

#### **Colouring or Drawing Together:**

Sit alongside the child with colouring books, blank paper, and crayons.

#### **Simple Puzzles:**

Work on a small, easy puzzle together to encourage quiet concentration.

#### **Quiet Reading:**

Share a story or look through picture books in a calm setting.

#### **Collaborative Drawing:**

Create a picture together on a large sheet of paper without focusing on the outcome.

## **Movement Strategies**

Movement strategies harness the body's natural ability to release tension and regulate stress. Gentle, purposeful physical activity can reset the body's stress response and help the child transition from high arousal to a state of calm. Adults modelling these movements provide a clear, shared example of self-care.

### **Try This:**

#### **Simple Stretching:**

Guide the child through gentle stretches like reaching up high or touching toes.

#### **Mindful Walking:**

Take a slow, intentional walk together, encouraging awareness of each step.

#### **Basic Yoga Poses:**

Practice simple poses such as the mountain or child's pose together.

#### **Animal Walks:**

Imitate gentle animal movements (like tiptoeing like a cat or waddling like a duck) to make movement fun and engaging.

## **Creative Expression Strategies**

Creative expression strategies offer a non-verbal outlet for processing emotions. By engaging in art, music, or storytelling, children can explore and express feelings in a safe, supportive environment. When adults participate in these activities, they model that emotions can be understood and managed through creative means.

### **Try This:**

#### **Music Making:**

Play soft, calming music or experiment with simple instruments like a tambourine or maracas together.

#### **Storytelling:**

Share a short story or prompt that allows the child to imagine and express different feelings.

#### **Collaborative Art Projects:**

Work on a joint drawing or craft project that encourages shared creativity and quiet reflection.

#### **Journaling:**

Encourage writing or drawing in a journal as a way to capture thoughts and feelings in a private, reflective space.

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## **Implementation Tips**

### **Observation First:**

Look for early signs of distress (e.g. fidgeting, withdrawal, changes in tone).

### **Gently Lead:**

Remember that your calm presence is the foundation for any strategy.

### **Follow-Up:**

Once the child is calmer, have a brief chat about what helped, so you can build on that next time.

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