



Growing Regulation Through Connection

Many adults expect young children to “calm down,” “focus,” and “use their words.”

Yet we often don’t realise that **self-regulation is a capacity that takes decades to fully develop.**

Self-regulation is not about being “good.”

It is about nervous system maturity.

The Expectation Gap

When We Expect Too Much, Too Soon

In today’s world, children are often expected to:

- sit still for extended periods
- manage frustration independently
- tolerate transitions without distress
- control impulses consistently
- recover quickly from emotional upset

But developing brains are not wired for this level of independence in the early years.

When we teach self-regulation without acknowledging a child’s co-regulation history, we unintentionally create an expectation gap — the space between what a child *can* do neurologically and what we *expect* them to do behaviourally.

Expecting a young child to regulate independently is like expecting a teenager to drive without driving lessons.

It is not a motivation issue.

It is not a character flaw.

It is a developmental reality.

Dr. Bruce Perry reminds us that the brain develops sequentially from the bottom up. Higher-level thinking skills cannot override stress responses if the lower brain systems are dysregulated.

Dr. Stephen Porges’ Polyvagal Theory further explains that when a child’s nervous system perceives threat, even minor frustration, their body shifts into survival states. In those moments, logic and reasoning are neurologically offline.

We cannot demand top-down control when the brain is operating bottom-up.



The Prefrontal Cortex Is Still Developing

The prefrontal cortex, the brain's self-regulation centre - does not fully mature until approximately age 25.

This region governs:

- ✓ impulse control
- ✓ emotional modulation
- ✓ planning and foresight
- ✓ flexible thinking
- ✓ attention and working memory

Dr. Dan Siegel describes integration of the brain as the foundation of regulation - and that integration unfolds over many years.

Young children physically cannot regulate emotions the way adults do because their neural pathways are still being built.

Self-regulation is not a milestone reached at age 4 or 5.
It is a long developmental journey.

Co-Regulation Comes First

Self-regulation begins at birth through co-regulation.

It develops through repeated experiences of a responsive, attuned adult helping a child feel safe, soothed, understood, and supported.

Through these safe relational experiences, the child's nervous system learns what regulation feels like.

Dr. Mona Delahooke emphasises that behaviour is an expression of the nervous system. When we support the nervous system, behaviour shifts naturally over time.

Co-regulation is not "rescuing."

It is not "over-helping."

It is building neural architecture.

Through emotionally attuned relationships, children develop:

- safety in their body
- awareness of sensations
- emotional literacy
- stress tolerance
- brain-body integration

Over time, these repeated experiences create the foundation for "top-down" control — the ability to pause, reflect, and respond intentionally.



But this control is built from the bottom up.

Self-Regulation Is Not About Obedience

Many adults confuse self-regulation with compliance.

A quiet child is not necessarily regulated.

They may be shutting down, which is a stress response.

Dr. Perry's research shows that freeze responses can look like compliance.

True regulation is not about suppressing emotions.

It is about being able to feel, process, and recover safely.

Why Some Children Need More Time

Regulation develops at different paces depending on:

- neurological development
- sensory processing differences
- temperament
- trauma or stress exposure
- relational safety
- neurodivergence

For neurodivergent children, regulation may look different - and that difference is not a deficit. It reflects a unique nervous system profile.

When independence is pushed before the nervous system is ready, we may see:

- increased frustration
- shutdown
- escalation
- shame
- internalised distress

Often what looks like "defiance" is dysregulation.

Often what looks like "won't" is actually "can't yet."

The Risk of Expecting Too Much Too Soon

When children are repeatedly expected to regulate beyond their developmental capacity, they may begin to internalise messages such as:

"I'm too much."

"I'm bad."

"I can't get it right."

Dr. Delahooke reminds us that when we focus only on behaviour without understanding the nervous system underneath, we risk missing the deeper developmental need.



If we, as adults, are still refining our own regulation skills — why would we expect children to master theirs so early?

What Actually Builds Self-Regulation?

Research across neuroscience and attachment science consistently shows that regulation capacity grows through:

- emotional attunement
- empathy and validation
- responsive caregiving
- predictable safety
- co-regulated repair after stress
- supportive relationships

Children need to feel understood before they can understand themselves.
They need to feel regulated before they can regulate.
They need connection before correction.

Dr. Siegel describes this as “feeling felt” - the experience of being emotionally seen and understood.

What Helps vs. What Hurts

✓ Helps

- predictable yet flexible routines
- emotionally attuned relationships
- validation of feelings
- movement and sensory supports
- compassionate boundaries
- teaching coping skills when calm

✗ Hurts

- punishment for strong emotions
- expecting children to “self-soothe” too early
- shaming distress
- escalating tone during dysregulation
- interpreting stress responses as intentional misbehaviour

Self-Regulation Is a Lifelong Process

A toddler melts down.

A preschooler struggles with impulse control.

A teenager slams a door.

Adults lose their temper sometimes too.



If self-regulation takes 25 years to develop, why do we expect perfection from preschoolers?

Practical Ways to Support Your Child

Co-Regulation in Everyday Moments

- ✓ Be the calm in their storm
Your nervous system leads theirs.
- ✓ Build a warm, responsive relationship
Connection wires the brain.
- ✓ “Be with” instead of fixing
Presence teaches safety.
- ✓ Name emotions
“You’re feeling frustrated because...”
- ✓ Structure the environment
Clear routines and boundaries reduce stress.
- ✓ Offer sensory supports
Movement, deep pressure, breathing, outdoor time.
- ✓ Use controlled choices
Support autonomy within structure.
- ✓ Use labelled praise
Reinforce regulation efforts.
- ✓ Be consistent and persistent
Regulation builds slowly.
- ✓ Focus on connection before correction
Regulation first. Teaching second.

The Bigger Developmental Picture

Self-regulation is not about control.
It is about capacity.

Capacity grows when children experience:

- safety in relationship
- nervous system support
- attuned caregiving



- compassionate structure
- developmentally appropriate expectations

When we shift from asking:

“Why can’t they control themselves?”

to asking:

“What does this nervous system need right now?”

Everything changes.

End Note:

Young children aren’t misbehaving when they struggle with self-regulation.

Their brains are still developing.

They need patience, connection, and guidance, not punishment.

And your calm presence is not spoiling them. It is building their brain.

