Co-Regulation in Practice

STRATEGIES FOR PRACTITIONERS WHO SERVE YOUTH AGED 14-24:

BREATH TO FOCUS STRATEGY

Self-Regulation is a central ingredient in lifelong success, predicting healthy relationships, economic self-sufficiency, and physical and emotional well-being. Adolescence involves rapid change in youths' brains and bodies, and is therefore an important time to foster self-regulation development. Adults play a significant role in this development.

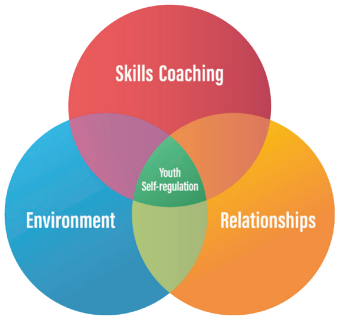
Adults can enhance youth self-regulation by providing **co-regulation** support. Through co-regulation, adults form relationships where youth feel cared for and known; co-create safe and nuturing environments; and give youth opportunities to practice self-regulation skills and reflect on how to apply them in their lives.

Self-regulation
/self reg je' lei sh(a)n/ noun
the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed behavior. Examples include calling a time out in an argument for the good of the relationship, or avoiding an impulse purchase to save money for something of greater value to you in the future.

Co-regulation
/co reg je' lei sh(a)n/ noun
the supportive process between adults and youth that integrates three key types of support: 1) providing warm, responsive relationships, 2) creating supportive environments, and 3) coaching and modeling self-regulation skills.

Practitioners can use strategies like the one in this handout to provide co-regulation support for youth.

Co-Regulation



The complete Co-Regulation in Practice Series offers six strategies to foster self-regulation, each targeting one part of Co-Regulation.

- **Relationship Strategies** — Welcoming, Positive Praise
- **Environment Strategies** — Group Agreement, Rest and Return
- **Self-Regulation Skills** — Breath to Refocus, Take Note

BREATH TO FOCUS

Research has shown the positive impact deep breathing has on our bodies' ability to deal with stress. A successful breath supplies our bodies with oxygen, regulates the pH of our blood, supports blood pressure control, and replenishes the brain and vital organs with essential nutrients. The act of taking slow, deep breaths triggers a cascade of mind-body systems that can result in increased comfort, relaxation, vigor, and alertness, and reduced symptoms of confusion, anxiety, depression, and anger.

Stress and breathing: When we experience stress, our breathing gets shallow and fast. This kind of breathing can narrow our perspective and increase anxiety and anger. Prolonged periods of stress can mean we breathe shallowly over time. As a result, we can have trouble connecting with others and staying alert, our cognitive abilities go slack, and it can be hard to have fun. Fortunately, we can override this state by building breathing skills.

The Strategy:

Taking a few slow, deep breaths is a strategy that not only improves our physical health, but also helps us manage intense feelings and stress, focus our attention where we need to, and communicate more effectively with others. As adults, it is important to practice slow breathing to manage our own stress or persist on a challenging task. Then as practitioners, we are better positioned to coach youth to use this skill for managing their feelings as well.

1 Inhale and exhale.

2 Model the skill authentically.

3 Plan when to breathe.

4 Breathe as needed.

BREATH TO FOCUS

Inhale and exhale.

This strategy is quite simple in practice. It involves taking a slow deep breath through the nose and deep into the lungs, pausing for a second, then slowly exhaling through the nose or mouth. **Repeat 3-5 times.**

Model the skill authentically.

Because breathing deeply can feel awkward or vulnerable, especially to adolescents, expect some resistance. **It is critical to push through the resistance by authentically demonstrating the behavior as you invite youth to breathe so they experience increased comfort and ease with the skill themselves.**

Plan when to breathe.

Most classes have natural transitions between activities and didactic content or lessons. By anticipating when it would be helpful to modulate the group's energy, you can plan to integrate *Breath to Refocus.* **Tell youth you will be coaching them to use this skill by integrating it throughout your classes.**

Breathe as needed.

Sometimes youth (and adults) experience intense emotion or high stress or energy at unanticipated times. When this occurs, breathing can help manage feelings and/or refocus the group. **As long as you do not make this skill seem like punishment for bad behavior, you can integrate the skill into workshops whenever it would be helpful to slow down and give the brain some oxygen.**

Suggested Citation

Frei, A., and Herman-Stahl, M. (2021). Co-Regulation in Practice Series. OPRE Brief #2021-91, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM)

The SARHM project was a study that aimed to increase the capacity of practitioners in youth-serving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs to promote self-regulation development among participants. It is funded through a collaboration between the federal Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation (OPRE) with the aim of further advancing relationship health and self-sufficiency by applying a developmental frame to human services. SARHM translated theory about co-regulation—the interactive process of adult support for youth self-regulation—into practice by developing a set of strategies that aligned with an evidence-informed co-regulation framework. The strategies were developed based on theory and evidence, but have not yet been tested for effectiveness.

As part of a nationwide initiative to promote healthy relationships in adult individuals, couples, and youth, OFA funds comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services. The SARHM project team partnered with two youth-serving HMRE programs to conduct formative, rapid-cycle evaluations to develop and refine co-regulation strategies by pilot testing them, providing data about their implementation, and refining them in the field without changing their curricula. Visit OPRE's website for a detailed final report on SARHM (Baumgartner et al., 2021). A list of additional products, including a guide for practitioners (Frei et al., 2021), a brief describing a preliminary draft co-regulation measure (Alamillo et al., 2021), and additional resources are available on OPRE's website under SARHM.

OPRE HMRF Healthy Marriage & Responsible Fatherhood Public Strategies Mathematica Progress Together