

Parent Help Strengthening Self Regulation

Parenting children who have been through pre-placement experiences presents significant challenges, and at times you may find yourself struggling to manage your own emotions and responses to your child's behaviour. In extreme situations you may even find yourself in a state of intense emotions and impulsive reactions where you just feel 'stuck' and have lost all perspective.

Understanding why a child behaves in baffling and extreme ways can actually help reduce the frustration, guilt or anger responses experienced by parents. Experiences of trauma, institutionalised care, loss and grief, or disrupted family experiences impact on the physiological development and functioning of a child's brain which in turn restricts healthy social, emotional and cognitive development. As a consequence these children can find it very difficult to regulate their own emotions and behaviour, and will often be reacting from an instinctive flight/fight response over which they have little control.

The ability to self-regulate your emotions can greatly assist you as a parent to develop a stronger relationship with your child, and to provide an emotionally safe environment which encourages healing. In addition, your ability to regulate your emotions acts as a model for your child: parental regulation leads to child self-regulation.

The way that we parent is significantly influenced by a number of factors:

- How we were parented. You may have experienced yourself using the same words as your own parent used in certain situations; or using a particular type of discipline because that's what you grew up with
- The community in which we were raised, whether that be a religious, cultural or social community: values, beliefs and norms can differ around what is acceptable parenting; the expression of emotions; and what is considered acceptable behaviour by children
- On a day to day basis, our parenting responses can differ due to factors such as how tired or hungry we are; how vulnerable, angry, or frustrated we feel.

It can be very helpful to reflect on these factors as a means of better understanding yourself, understanding what 'triggers' you emotionally, and to determine if there are any of your beliefs or learned parenting behaviours that may be in conflict with your child's emotional or behavioural responses. For example, a child may have learned early in life that it is unsafe to tell the truth, so lying becomes a survival tool, something that has become an automatic response to any perceived danger. So for the child it is a safety issue, whereas the parent and society see it as an issue of honesty and respect. (further reading – Turtle, Safety and the Lizard)

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Practical strategies to help with Self - Regulation

- Deeper self-understanding can be very helpful for improving our ability to self-regulate emotions (for further reading on this topic see Siegel & Harzell, Parenting from the Inside Out)
- Mindfulness, Yoga, Meditation, spiritual practices, can help us to stay present, be more self-aware, and maintain inner calm
- Deep breathing
- Taking Time-Out to give us breathing space or thinking space
- The 'Stop, Think, Do Model' by Lindy Petersen was developed to use with children but can be very helpful for adults. For example, when your child has an angry outburst over a seemingly minor incident and you feel yourself beginning to react and lose control, you can apply the Stop Think Do model.

STOP

Don't React. Consider what is happening:

I can feel the heat rising in my body and my stomach tightening; I feel angry and guilty. What is going on for my child? She is having difficulty regulating her emotions; perhaps she perceives the situation as a threat to her safety?

THINK

Consider Solutions:

Positive self-talk "My child is having a normal fight reaction; this does not mean I am a failure as a parent"

I can calm myself with deep breathing, and practice mindfulness

My child is not being deliberately naughty, she needs my help

DO

Take Action:

Slow deep breaths; in through the nose and releasing tension with the out breath

Bring my full attention to the present moment and tune in to my child

Use empathic response to reduce the intensity of the child's anger, "I can see how mad you feel about this"

References and links

Siegel, DJ & Hartzell, M 2004, Parenting from the Inside Out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive, Tarcher, Penguin, NY.

Turtle, A. (2001) Safety and The Lizard: The Essay - The Logic, Science, and Art of Maintaining Safety between People. <http://www.alturtle.com/archives/1239> Mindfulness Resources: www.actmindfully.com.au

Lindy Peterson, "Stop think Do Model" www.stopthinkdo.com Petersen, L. 2002, Social Savvy: Helping your Child Fit In