



# Downloading Calm: Supporting Co-Regulation in Early Childhood Leaders

WHO PUTS THE "SELF" IN "SELF-REGULATION?"

BY LINDSAY MINER

In recent years, social-emotional learning and development have emerged as a key focus of research and discourse in early childhood education. A key component of social-emotional development is emotional regulation. Although emotional regulation is often referred to as "self-regulation," early relationships with trusted caregivers are an important factor in developing the "self" piece of "self-regulation."

In their earliest years, children rely on trusted caregivers to help them manage and soothe distressing emotions and sensations. This process is called "[co-regulation](#)." However, for co-regulation to be successful, the adult caregiver must first be able to manage their own distressing emotions in a healthy manner.

So, what happens when co-regulation depends on adults who are consistently overworked and overstimulated? This article will explore ways in which early childhood leaders and administrators can use co-regulation to support early childhood educators, ultimately leading to enhanced self-regulation skills in educators.

## STRESS BEGETS STRESS

Early childhood educators are living and working in unprecedented times. According to the [2024 RAND American Pre-K Teacher Survey](#), public pre-K teachers nationwide reported experiencing workplace stress at nearly twice the rate of similar working adults in other occupations.

Top stressors include:

- Low levels of compensation.
- Lack of support and resources in addressing children's challenging behaviors and mental health needs.
- Navigating teaching and learning during, and after, a global pandemic.
- Increased workload that requires working outside of contracted hours.
- Staffing shortages and high rates of teacher turnover.
- Compassion fatigue and burnout from the emotional labor of the job.

The [Child Mind Institute](#) explains that in the same way that an adult's calm can help a child feel calm, an adult's stress can cause a child to feel stressed. Therefore, the first step in successful co-regulation requires that trusted caregivers are able to handle their own stress in a healthy way. However, feedback

from early childhood educators, such as the stressors listed above, demonstrates that handling stress in a healthy way is easier said than done.

## DOWNLOADING CALM

With the high levels of workplace stress being reported by early childhood professionals in recent years, it is more important than ever that leaders and administrators within early childhood become a source of co-regulation for their staff. Dr. Becky Bailey refers to the process of co-regulation between a trusted caregiver and a child as “[downloading calm](#).” However, downloading calm is not exclusive to adult-child relationships. Below are some ways that early childhood leaders and administrators can download calm to their staff.

### Mindfulness Exercises

According to [Zero to Three](#), research has shown the benefits of mindfulness in managing stress for early childhood educators. These benefits include, reducing anxiety and depression, increasing levels of empathy and compassion, and enhancing emotional regulation, self-compassion, attentional awareness, and perspective taking.

Some mindfulness exercises leaders and administrators can initiate with staff include:

1. [The STOP Strategy](#):
  - a. Stop. In times of stress and overwhelm, encourage staff members to: Stop, pause, and focus.
  - b. Take a deep breath in and out alongside staff members. Encourage them to notice how it feels to breathe.
  - c. Observe. Encourage staff members to acknowledge the emotions and physical responses that they are feeling, positive or negative, without judgment. Recognize that these feelings are valid, momentary, and manageable.
  - d. Proceed. Give staff members space to think about how they want to respond. Process alongside them if they need to talk, and provide assistance in the classroom if they need a moment to themselves.
2. [Rhythmic Breathing](#):
  - a. Teach and practice rhythmic breathing alongside staff members as a tool to use when they are feeling stressed:
    - i. Breathe in as you count to four.
    - ii. Hold that breath as you count to four.
    - iii. Breathe out as you count to four.
    - iv. Hold as you count to four.

- v. Repeat this for a few rounds and notice how your mind and body feel afterwards.
- 3. Five Senses Exercise:
  - a. Teach this exercise to staff members and practice alongside them as a tool to use to ground themselves when they are feeling overwhelmed:
    - i. See: Look around you and name **five** things you can see.
    - ii. Feel: Notice and describe the texture of **four** things you can feel/touch.
    - iii. Listen: Notice and name **three** things you can hear.
    - iv. Smell: Notice and name **two** things you can smell.
    - v. Taste: Notice **one** thing you can taste. Focus on the sensations in your mouth, such as your teeth and tongue.
- 4. Consider posting [Zero to Three's Guided Reflective Practice Checklist](#) in classrooms, break rooms, and offices. Encourage staff members to set aside time for reflection each day. It may be helpful if administrators step into the classroom to allow each staff member a few minutes for reflective practice. Leaders and administrators should also set aside time for their own reflections each day.

### Reflective Supervision

Reflective supervision provides consistent, ongoing support to increase the reflective capacity of early childhood educators through a collaborative and trusting relationship with a leader/administrator.

Practicing reflective supervision with early childhood educators can reduce stress and provide opportunities for leaders and administrators to gain insight into the challenges and stressors their staff members face, and find moments to recharge and remain (or download) calm.

Research indicates that consistent reflective supervision can lead to positive changes in early childhood caregivers, including improved reflective functioning, increased job satisfaction, and reduced rates of burnout. When leaders provide a regular, collaborative, and trusting space for reflection with their staff members, their staff members are better equipped to offer reflective support to the children and families they engage with.

Some [tips](#) for effective reflective supervision:

1. Maintain a consistent (ideally weekly) day and time for reflective supervision with each staff member.
2. Operate from a strengths-based approach:
  - a. Provide staff members with the respect and support that you want to see them provide to children and families.
  - b. Consider staff members your partners in creating positive and trusting environments for children and families.
  - c. Reflect on staff members' input based on their own, unique expertise and experience.

- d. Reflect that staff members' contributions are valuable and important.
- 3. Consider reflective questions, such as:
  - a. Tell me more about...?
  - b. How did it feel when...?
  - c. What are you noticing about...?
  - d. What do you think the child was trying to communicate?
  - e. What are your strengths in this situation?
  - f. What are you finding the most challenging right now?
  - g. What would you like to learn or develop next?
  - h. How might your own experiences be influencing your reaction?
  - i. How can I best support you in this?
- 4. Make time for your own reflection:
  - a. What are your strengths in the supervisory relationship?
  - b. What are you finding most challenging about reflective supervision?
  - c. What common stressors are coming up in reflective supervision and how can you best start to address them?

Early childhood leaders and administrators can act as co-regulation partners for their staff members by taking the time to weave practices such as mindfulness and reflective supervision into the daily fabric of their learning environments. This has the potential to create a beautiful trickle-down effect. By helping staff members co-regulate, staff members enhance their own self-regulation skills. As staff members enhance their own self-regulation skills, they become a more consistent and stable co-regulation partner for the children and families they serve.

**Lindsay Miner, M.S.,** is a Report Review and Certification Specialist assessor at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University. She reviews reports and develops report writing manuals for the IDHS assessment team, who conduct classroom and program assessments throughout the state of Illinois. Lindsay holds a baccalaureate degree in Sociology and Urban Planning from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a graduate degree in Child Development from the Erikson Institute. Prior to joining the McCormick Institute, Lindsay worked as a play therapist, home visitor, and early childhood educator, with a focus on infants and toddlers, throughout the Chicagoland area.