

*This tip sheet introduces what causes unmanageable stress in children, the role the brain plays, and the impact a child's unmanageable stress may have on caregiving adults. It also describes what children need to remain emotionally regulated.*

All humans use behavior to tell others how they are feeling physically and emotionally. Behaviors provide insight into a part—but not the entire picture—of those feelings. Young children rely on communicating with their behaviors regularly and often; it is their first language. Even after they begin to speak using words and signs, young children use behavior to tell us something about their inner state. Behavior invites us to try and understand why and when a child is unable to manage their emotional responses in acceptable ways. This is important, because when we as children's caregiving adults find stress behaviors challenging, it becomes more difficult for us to respond in supportive ways.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "STRESS?"

Feeling under pressure or unsafe causes stress. It usually happens when we are in a situation that feels unmanageable or uncontrollable. Our bodies translate these feelings into physical, emotional, and behavioral responses. For both children and adults, experiencing stress is normal—and can be beneficial—when it is manageable (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Stress becomes unmanageable in the absence of knowledge and skills. Young children's stress responses develop as they grow and experience their world. Their behavior can tell us something about how they are feeling. In times of unmanageable stress, the behaviors they use may be viewed as "challenging."

## WHAT IS "CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR?"

Challenging behavior has been defined as "any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults" (Smith & Fox, 2003, p. 5).

Some behaviors may not align with what we commonly think of as challenging. Overly passive or low-reactivity behaviors may be less disruptive to the caregiving environment but still interfere with a child's engagement and learning, as they withdraw and refrain from engaging in relationships and activities that promote learning. "Big" behaviors, such as crying, hitting, and non-compliance also prevent children from learning. These behaviors can tell us something about how they are feeling. They can cause stress in their caregiving adults, too.

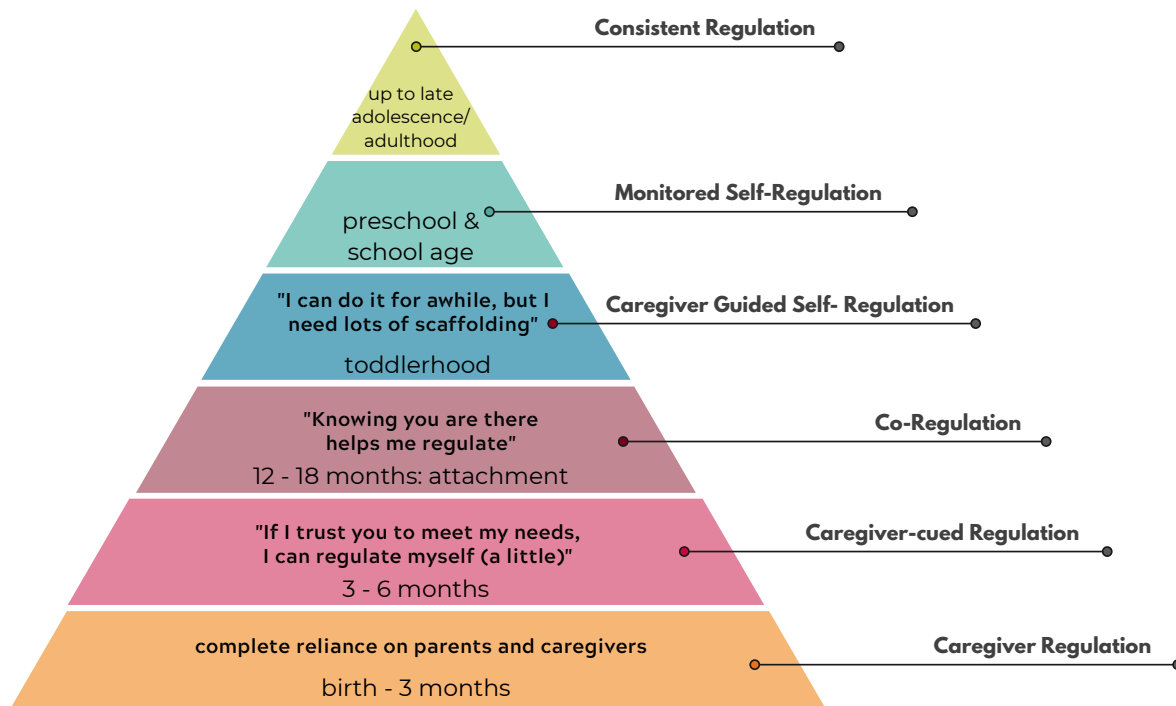
## LEARNING TO SELF-REGULATE

The "conscious control of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" is known as self-regulation (McClelland & Tominey, 2014, p. 2). Children have a limited capacity to self-regulate due to their developmental stage. Very young children need the scaffolding of adults to regulate until they can do it on their own. When a child has an atypical developmental profile, or has experienced abuse, neglect, or severe trauma, the ability to self-regulate is greatly impacted and skill-building extended.

# Introducing It: Understanding and Recognizing Stress Behaviors in Young Children

Center for Early Education  
and Development

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Sroufe (1995) and Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins (2005) in Harrison, M. (2018). *Understanding Early Social and Emotional Development Part 1 course* [PowerPoint slides]. Center for Early Education and Development, University of Minnesota.

As their caregiving adults, we can offer children warm and responsive interactions when they are stressed and dysregulated to help them become regulated. Helping them in this way promotes their understanding, expression, and regulation of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is called co-regulation (Murray et al., 2015). Co-regulation teaches children they can trust adults to meet their needs.

## THE BRAIN'S RESPONSE TO STRESS

Our brains are programmed to keep us safe. When danger is detected, the brain releases stress hormones. These hormones alert specific brain regions, causing physical and emotional reactions in us. These stress reactions make it difficult to engage the our prefrontal cortex—the region of the brain responsible for critical thinking and learning. Even adults cannot access their prefrontal cortex without first regulating their emotional responses. Accessing the prefrontal cortex becomes even more difficult for children with atypical developmental profiles, or those who have experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect.

Adults responding to children's stress responses in ways that make the child feel safe and secure is

the ingredient needed for their brains to begin to learn self-regulation skills.

Without these responsive relationships and the co-regulation they provide, children learn that they cannot depend on adults to meet their needs and keep them safe, and their development—and stress responses—adapt in ways that can be problematic in some contexts. We can help children develop regulation skills by providing them with predictable, empathetic, and warm responses (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020).

By joining the child in the midst of their distress, we interrupt their learned responses. We become an agent of change by helping establish new, healthier pathways in the brain.

## RELATIONSHIPS AT THE SPEED OF TRUST

Children learn through their relationships. They learn about themselves, and they learn if their world is safe and responsive or unsafe and dismissive through relationships. Healthy relationships with caregiving adults teach children to trust their world and caregivers, freeing them to explore and learn.

Developing a child's trust is the foundational tool in helping them begin to understand and manage their emotional responses and resulting behavior. Children, therefore, need us to:

- Manage our own responses to their behaviors
- Respond with warm predictability and empathy
- Give them language to name their feelings and offer alternative, acceptable behaviors
- Know and see them for who they are, including recognizing their temperament, preferences, developmental stage, abilities, and default stress responses—commonly referred to as “fight, flight, or freeze”
- Understand and acknowledge their family's history, culture, language, and values
- Use our understanding of the brain's response to stress in helping shape behavior

## REFERENCES

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## DEFINING IT

### Self-regulation

The conscious control of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

### Dysregulation

A lack of awareness, understanding, and poorly managed response to emotion

### Co-regulation

Offering warm and responsive interaction to another in order to promote understanding, expression, and regulation of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors

## DIVING INTO IT

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