



Therapeutic Parenting Journal

A Resource for Parents and Professionals

Focus of this Issue:

Bringing Calm to
Inner Chaos

Supporting Children with
Attachment Trauma in School

Building Trusting
Relationships with Teens

The Art of Co-regulation



Attachment
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Parent's Corner The Art of Co-Regulation

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Has this ever happened to you? You walk into a place that is supposed to help you and your child and it turns out to create more issues and complications for you both to deal with? This could happen at a school, a doctor's office, a support/play group, etc.

Early on in my life as a therapeutic parent, (long before I'd ever heard this term) I was advised to take my son to a clinic for a brain scan in hopes of getting a diagnosis for his issues. My son, adopted at age four, had only been home for about 8 months and was still severely impacted by the trauma, the transition, and the culture shock (he was from a small village with dirt roads and no TV). So when I called to make the appointment I asked about the details of the procedure and if they were prepared to conduct a brain scan on my son, who for the most part was pretty scared, had limited language and little exposure to medical technology. As a mother, I felt compelled to have the test done in order to help my son, but I was concerned that through this process he might experience more stress and trauma, which I definitely wanted to avoid. When I posed this question to the receptionist, she laughed a bit then assured me that a good percentage of their business was testing

children adopted from other countries so the staff was very experienced and prepared to work with my son. With her assurances and armed with a few details about the process, I decided to move forward with the appointment.

Well, suffice it to say, the information I was given did not prepare us for what the appointment would really be like, and the staff was in no way prepared to deal with how my child would react. Without reciting all the gory details of the appointment – at the end of a long scary prep, my son and I found ourselves in a large, white, brightly lit room, wires stuck on his head as he sat on a cold, hard table next to a bunch of very large tubes and other frightening medical equipment. We were holding hands and I could see and feel the intensity of his fear – he was somewhere between frozen stiff and ready to run at a moment's notice.

Seeing and feeling his state, I began to panic as well thinking, “Oh my goodness – this is awful! What are we going to do?” This whole time, my poor boy had his eyes glued on me as he gripped my hand. I'm not sure how it came to me but, I began to realize what I needed to do... I needed to calm down – I used my rational mind to tell myself that we were going to be just fine. Once I got calm my energy shifted, my grip relaxed and my eyes softened. In a soft voice, I asked my son a question, “What do you think Betina (our cat) is doing right now?” I could see his focus shift from the scary room to the inside of our home. As he thought about Betina, he began to calm and the hint of a smile came to his lips, as he said in his developing English, “Her pobbawy wooking nah da burds.”

I continued to engage him to focus on this scene that was so simple and ordinary yet so familiar and comforting to us both. The more we talked about Betina and home, the better we felt. When the actual scan began he wasn't supposed to speak, so I continued telling him the story of Betina and the birds till the test was over. After the scan was completed, the staff voiced their amazement at the level of calm he was able to achieve.





I'm offering this snap-shot from our lives as an example of co-regulation – In using my own self-regulation to help regulate my son's emotional state, I actually regulated us both. In the story, our emotional states flexed between stress/fear and then returned to calm through co-regulation. As humans we can experience this all day long without really thinking about it. But as therapeutic parents, co-regulation is something that is created through our intentional practice, repetition and over time.

An infant cannot maintain physical or emotional regulation without the parent. Ideally, regulation is learned developmentally and is established between an infant and their primary caregiver. For many children with issues of trauma and attachment, this process was disrupted, making their ability to self-regulate in a positive manner virtually impossible. So it's left to us as therapeutic parents to practice and engage our children in the art of co-regulation to provide what they missed in early childhood. I say "art" because co-regulation, like any artform, is created between the unique individuals/family involved; it requires self-expression. So like art, it's original to the people creating it.

David Kerrigan, Ph.D. of Intensive Changes and Mary Kerrigan, LCSW of Peaceful Living Consults are both highly experienced professionals in all things attachment/trauma related. David shared that co-regulation is always happening in relationships; we are always inviting each other to regulate or dysregulate through our interactions. He points out that when someone has experienced chronic dysregulation since early childhood, it can become their "new normal" and that feelings of comfort/security can actually feel threatening to a child accustomed to feelings of chaos and disruption. With this in mind, parents need

to lead and be intentional in creating positive co-regulating experiences and be mindful of managing their own regulation. I've listed his suggestions below along with some of Mary's practical strategies for creating co-regulation with your child.

Managing Self-Regulation in Parents/Caregivers:

- Be aware of your triggers so you can maintain focus on positive co-regulation
- Find/Create a System of Support
 - Support groups – local or online
 - Supportive activities or interests that help you to regulate: music, movies, hobbies, exercise, etc.
- Tap Into a Transcendent Secure Base – This is something that is beyond you that is a source of strength, comfort and clarity of purpose like: a personal faith, nature, meditation, etc.

Creating Co-Regulation – Some of the Basics

- Be intentional –
 - Babies cannot regulate without the primary caregiver
 - Regulation needs to be created and reinforced at every life stage
- Activities will vary depending upon the child's developmental stage but general guidelines for creating co-regulation include activities that are:
 - Rhythmic, repeated over time, and incorporate motion

Babies and Younger Children

- Physical closeness
 - Holding child close so they can feel your heart rate, feeding and deep eye gazing
 - Massage of "safe-parts" like hands or feet
- Rhythmic motion
 - Rocking, bouncing, swinging, clapping hands, playing patty-cake, etc.





Older Children

- Engage in activities that can be done together that are energetic but not overly hyper and gets you physically “in-sync” like:
 - Blowing bubbles, walking, tossing a ball, singing, dancing, coloring, drawing, and playing a game like rock-paper-scissors
 - Reading a book to your child
 - Eating the child’s favorite food while sitting together
 - Pushing against a wall side-by-side
- Establish traditions like:
 - Sharing a snack together every day after school
 - Reading them a book before bed

Becoming intentional and purposeful about creating and developing co-regulation within the parent/child relationship can develop into a resource to draw on in difficult or stressful times. It can help children and adults to cope and maintain connection, as well develop a sense of security and regulation. Truly, parent or child, this is something we all could use more of, regardless of our age.

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Need to learn more about Therapeutic Parenting?

ATN's Learning Center (www.attachu.org) is a fabulous resource. Our Essential Conversations for Therapeutic Parents is a 5-part webinar series created by our Founding Faculty of attachment professionals and experienced parents. ATN Members get discounts on all items and events offered by ATN.





The Voice of Traumatized Children & Their Families for 20 Years

Help ATN Reach Even Farther in 2015!

For Attachment & Trauma Network. 2014 was a year of growth. Our accomplishments include:

- Reaching over 10,000 people with information about the impact of early childhood trauma & attachment disorders.
- Organized the 1st Annual National Attachment Trauma Awareness (NATA) Day in June with social media and live events.
- Launched ATN's Therapeutic Parenting Journal to focus on the skills and strategies of therapeutically parenting traumatized children.
- Hosted an 11-day, online Educating Traumatized Children Summit for more than 3,100 parents, teachers and therapy professionals.
- Increased our membership by 65%.
- Was instrumental in the grassroots efforts that led to the passage of HR 4980, which provides funding for post-adoption services & support.

But there's so much more to do!



Statistics say that 45% of all adopted children will need help to heal their early childhood trauma. (That's 450,000+ children in US alone.)

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