



Supporting children's self-regulation, the Hanen way!

By Lauren Lowry
Hanen SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

At the Hanen Centre, we've been talking a lot lately about how to help children in their development of self-regulation. There are several reasons for this:

- self-regulation is a strong predictor of academic and social success
- self-regulation abilities set the stage for children to attend and learn from their everyday activities and social interactions
- between 50 to 80% of children with communication delays have challenges with self-regulation
- researchers have found links between language and self-regulation, with each influencing the development of the other

(Binns, Hutchinson, & Oram Cardy, 2019; Aro, Laakso, Määttä, Tolvanen, & Poikkeus, 2014; Schmitt, Justice, & O'Connell, 2014)

Furthermore, according to a recent article by Binns et al. (2019), many of the strategies used to promote self-regulation are within the speech language pathologist's scope of practice.

We're not formally trained in this area, so it can be daunting to think about how to promote self-regulation with the children on our caseloads. However, you may already be promoting this important skill without even knowing it! There are many similarities between strategies used to promote self-regulation and the Hanen strategies we use to encourage communication and interaction. Below I discuss self-regulation and describe some of the strategies suggested by Binns et al. (2019) that support self-regulation and compare them with the Hanen approach.

What is self-regulation?

At first glance, definitions of self-regulation can be intimidating. For example:

- "the act of managing cognition and emotion, which enables goal-directed actions such as organizing behavior, controlling impulses, and solving problems constructively" (Hamoudi, Murray, Sorensen, & Fontaine, 2015)
- "the dynamic interaction of biological and cognitive systems, all working together towards attaining a state of homeostasis (i.e., relative state of equilibrium)" (Binns et al., 2019)

While these definitions sound complicated, what they are really describing is how well someone stays calm, alert and responsive in the face of various life stressors (Shanker, 2013). These stressors affect all individuals - including children - and come from a variety of sources.

Sources of stress for young children

Binns et al. (2019) identify four main types of stressors that can impact young children's ability to self-regulate:

Types of stressors

- **Biological stressors** – these include hunger, fatigue, sickness, pain, overwhelming sensory stimuli, or motor challenges. For example, a noisy environment could be a biological stressor to a child with a sensitivity to loud noises.
- **Emotional stressors** – these are strong emotional responses such as fear, sadness, anger, or excitement. For example, a change in routine could trigger fear, resulting in emotional stress.
- **Cognitive stressors** – activities involving memory, attention, comprehension, reasoning, problem solving, or self-awareness. While a certain amount of cognitive stress is required for learning and growth, too much can trigger a stress response. For example, asking too many questions might be a cognitive stressor for a child with language delay.
- **Social stressors** – these stressors stem from social interactions or contexts, such as public speaking, reading social cues, being socially excluded, perspective taking, or confusing social situations. Having to join in and play with a new peer group could be a social stressor for a child

When a child is faced with one or more of these stressors or repeated exposure to stressful stimuli, it results in the release of an overabundance of neurotransmitters (noradrenaline and dopamine), which impairs the child's executive functions and metacognition. This can result in fewer resources left for self-regulation, which in turn affects how a child learns (Binns et al., 2019). A dysregulated child may appear inattentive, hyperactive, or lethargic, and he may demonstrate a change in his behaviour or affect or he might avoid certain activities.

Because the development of communication skills hinges on children's ability to engage, attend, and learn from their environment, we need to think about the impact stressors might have on a child. This can be accomplished by observing the child in his or her natural contexts, as well as collaborating with parents and professionals who are involved with the child (Binns et al., 2019). A case study describing how to identify signs of dysregulation and stressors can be found in our article "Pathways to Promoting Self-Regulation: What can SLPs do?"

Once stressors are identified, we can use co-regulating strategies to help mitigate the impact of these stressors so that the child can better engage and attend.

The Sensory Preferences Checklist in the More Than Words® Guidebook or the Sensory Checklist in the TalkAbility™ Guidebook can be helpful for collecting information about some of a child's biological stressors (such as his response to sounds, tactile experiences, movement, etc.)

Co-regulating paves the way to self-regulation

Young children need help learning to self-regulate, and this is accomplished through co-regulated interactions. During co-regulation, people regulate each other's behaviour by continually reading each other's facial expressions, tone of voice, affect and actions, and then responding and adjusting their own behaviour accordingly. When caregivers co-regulate with their children, they provide support and scaffolding that enables children to gradually acquire the skills needed for independent self-regulation (Binns et al., 2019).

Multiple co-regulating strategies can be used simultaneously, and strategy selection depends on the stressors that most impact the child. When reading through the list of strategies presented by Binns et al. (2019), it's striking how many of them are aligned with some of the Hanen strategies we use to promote communication and interaction:

Co-regulation strategy (Binns et al., 2019)	Hanen strategy
Modulate exposure of stimulation that might trigger a stress response Determine if information is being presented too fast or slow, whether it's too loud, too intense, etc.	The 4 S's (Say Less, Stress, Go Slow, and Show) While the 4 S's don't pertain to all stimulation to which a child is exposed, this strategy ensures parents modulate their language input according to their child's level and needs.
Add elements of predictability Familiar routines foster security and allow for greater energy to be spent on learning and communicating. It's important to build novelty into predictable routines to support adaptability. This should be accomplished by changing one element of the routine while keeping the rest of the routine predictable. This is especially important for children with autism spectrum disorder.	SPARK and ROCK Parents use these strategies to build repetitive, predictable daily routines and games. Parents of children with autism spectrum disorder are encouraged to slightly change or add to the routine when they "Keep it going" (part of the "K" in ROCK) once the routines are established and familiar.
Be warm and responsive High levels of social support via responsiveness, sensitivity, enriched environments, and strong attachment relationships release neurotransmitters that reduce children's stress, calm them, and help them self-regulate.	OWL & Follow your child's lead Helping parents Observe, Wait, and Listen and Follow their child's lead creates a responsive environment in which parents are tuned in to their child's needs, interests and messages.
Read and acknowledge the child's intent When children's cues and attempts to communicate are read and responded to accurately, they have better emotional-regulation, social communication, self-control, and persistence in the face of problems.	OWL and Interpret The practice of closely observing and listening to a child while waiting for him to communicate, and then interpreting his or her messages are core strategies for promoting communication in the Hanen approach.
Reduce the cognitive load Tasks that are too difficult deplete a child's energy. Consider diversifying how information is presented by slowing down, decreasing the amount of information, and using gestures, facial expression and sound effects to add meaning to verbal language. Working within the child's zone of proximal development is key, wherein the cognitive load is neither too difficult nor too easy.	The 4 S's Saying less, stressing key words, going slow and showing through gestures and visuals is meant to reduce the cognitive load for children who are struggling with language acquisition.
Follow the child's lead Binns et al. (2019) cite the It Takes Two to Talk® program in their discussion of following the child's lead. This strategy allows children to devote more time and energy to tasks because they are meaningful to them. This promotes attention, processing, and persistence. Following a child's lead also helps children form secure attachments, which helps mitigate stress.	Follow the child's lead We encourage caregivers to follow their child's lead to promote responsive interactions and communication. It's clear though, that there are other benefits for a child's self-regulation with this strategy.

Binns et al. (2019) mention a few other co-regulation strategies that are helpful. While these don't align neatly with specific Hanen strategies, they fit perfectly within our child-centred, responsive philosophy:

- **Modify the environment** – modifying the environment to minimize stressors might involve reducing loud noises, removing clutter or extra toys, conducting therapy in a different room, using supportive seating, etc.
- **Validate children's feelings and their right to experience and express a range of emotions** - supporting children to use socially acceptable ways of communicating can be accomplished by acknowledging their messages (instead of trying to distract or invalidating their feelings), as well as joining in with their pretend play, during which emotional topics may arise. For more information about using pretend play to promote self-regulation, see our article from last month's Wig Wag Minute.
- **Acknowledge that our own ability to self-regulate helps us be an effective co-regulator** – regulation is somewhat contagious, and we may feel stressed when a child experiences stress and lashes out or becomes inattentive. In order to co-regulate and support children, we need to monitor our own emotions and behaviour and respond in a calm manner.

The next step: Strategies that lay the foundation for independent self-regulation

As children continue to develop their language comprehension, conversation abilities and executive function skills, the next step is to promote autonomous self-regulation. Children will continue to require co-regulation at times, but the focus changes to helping children become aware of signs of their dysregulation and ways they can help themselves recover from stressors (see Binns et al., 2019 for a discussion).

Many of the young children we work with may not be ready for this next step and might require continued co-regulation. For those who have reached this developmental level, Binns et al. (2019) suggest providing children with opportunities for:

- making choices
- taking initiative
- solving problems
- negotiating rules
- making decisions

Communicative temptations and open-ended toys create situations for children to practice these types of skills and for problems to naturally arise. Working on self-regulation vocabulary and mental state words (words for thoughts and emotions, and the physical manifestations of these emotions) is also helpful at this stage.

Stay tuned next month for an article about promoting mental state vocabulary with young children.

Summary

Since self-regulation affects a child's ability to learn from his or her environment, it can impact communication development. It's encouraging to know that many of the strategies for promoting self-regulation align with strategies we are already using on a regular basis. This means that much of what we teach parents is having a dual effect. By broadening the lens through which we view these strategies and doing some detective work about possible stressors, we can better understand the children with whom we work and enhance the impact of our intervention.

If you are interested in learning more about self-regulation, you can find additional information in the following resources:

e-Seminar:

- *Pathways to Promoting Self-regulation in Young Children - An Introduction* – This 2-hour eSeminar describes how self-regulation develops, how you can identify the signs of regulation difficulties, and practical strategies for supporting self-regulation. It includes contrastive video examples and self-reflection questions to facilitate your understanding.

Articles for professionals:

- *Pathways to Promoting Self-Regulation: What can SLPs do?*
- *Behaviour Regulation and Language: A two-way street?*

Articles for parents:

- *Why Self-regulation Is Important for Young Children*
- *What Is Behaviour Regulation? And What Does It Have to Do With Language Development?*

References

- Aro, T., Laakso, M., Määttä, S., Tolvanen, A., & Poikkeus, A. (2014). Associations between Toddler-age Communication and Kindergarten-age Self-regulatory Skills. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 57(4), 1405-1417.
- Binns, A. V., Hutchinson, L. R., & Oram Cardy, J. (2019). The Speech-Language Pathologist's Role in Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation: A Review and Tutorial. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 78, 1-17.
- Earle, C. (2015). *Making Hanen Happen Leaders Guide for Target Word™ — The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children who are Late Talkers, Fourth Edition*. Hanen Early Language Program: Toronto, ON.
- Hamoudi, A., Murray, D. W., Sorensen, L. & Fontaine, A. (2015). *Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: A Review of Ecological, Biological, and Developmental Studies of Self-Regulation and Stress*. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.
- Schmitt, M. B., Justice, L. M., & O'Connell, A. (2014). Vocabulary Gain among Children with Language Disorders: Contributions of Children's Behavior Regulation and Emotionally-Supportive Environments. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 23(3), 373-384.
- Shanker, S. (2013). *Calm, Alert and Happy*. Retrieved online from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/shanker.pdf>.
- Sussman, F. (2006). *TalkAbility: People Skills for Verbal Children on the Autism Spectrum*. Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.
- Sussman, F. (2012). *More Than Words®: A Parent's Guide to Building Interaction and Language Skills for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Social Communication Difficulties, 2nd ed.* Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.
- Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays, 5th ed.* Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)