

What You Need to Know.

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

Self-Regulation: A Parent's Guide

Self-regulation and your child's health

Calm, alert and learning: who wouldn't want their child in that optimal state of mind. Naturally, your child's overall health—both physical and mental—is a priority for you as a parent. And who would guess that a major influence on our health as adults and kids lies deep inside the brain, in a system that regulates how well we respond to stress. The beating of your child's heart, your child's breathing, digestion, how well your child pays attention and learns, even your child's facial expressions and ability to hear your voice are all controlled by this system in the brain. This internal regulation system acts like the thermostat on your furnace. Let's say you set the thermostat to 18°. The furnace works around this set point by turning on when the temperature falls below about 15° and turns off when the temperature hits 21°. But the thermostat can break if it gets overused, and the same thing can happen to your child's "brain thermostat" when there is too much stress. The thermostat, or ability to self-regulate, simply gets overwhelmed.

Signs of stress

It's usually pretty obvious when your home thermostat breaks down: the house is too cold or too hot. It's also pretty straightforward for your child. Here are some simple signs that a child's stress system is overworking:

- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep

- Crabby mood in the morning
- Easily upset, even over little things, trouble calming down when this happens
- Volatile mood
- Trouble paying attention, or even hearing your voice
- Frequent anger, or signs of sadness, fear or anxiety

Finding the causes

If these signs are evident in your child, you can help by "playing detective" and exploring what the reasons might be that have led to the stresses that resulted in the observed behaviours. Even very young children can actively engage in figuring out why they are in a state that isn't pleasant or comfortable for them or for you. Stress might be coming from all sorts of things. Any combination of the following can lead to stress that can upset the thermostat. Your child might be:

- Sensitive to lights, noises, crowds or strong smells
- Underslept
- Responding to the effects of too much junk food or sugar
- Under-exercised or inactive
- Watching too much television or spending too much time playing video games or on other devices

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The five steps of Shanker Self-Reg®

Your child's wishes are the same as yours: to be happy, to have friends, to pursue interests and be successful at school. The Shanker Method® offers five steps you can take with your child to get there:

1. Read the signs and reframe the behaviour.
2. Recognize the stressors.
3. Reduce the stress for your child.
4. Reflect—help your child learn to reflect on their own self-regulation.
5. Respond—help your child learn to respond to stressors and return to calm.

Next steps

Sound difficult? You might be pleasantly surprised. These have proven very successful in helping thousands of parents nurture happier and healthier children. With the right kind of support, the results can happen fast. Contact The MEHRIT Centre at info@self-reg.ca or visit www.self-reg.ca for further information.

