



fit-ology fast track_(sm):

“Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life,” by Dr. Stuart Shanker

overview

What we see as “behavior issues” are really clues to areas the child is not yet able to regulate within herself. The work of the adult is to find those areas and their environmental stressors, and to help the child see and work with them.

relevant to

ADHD, ODD, SPD, GAD; frequent “meltdowns,” irritability, quick frustration, impulsivity, explosive emotion; parenting; relationship-building within the family and with friends.

good for

parents, teachers, sports coaches, executive function coaches.

summary: 265 summarized in 8

The Essentials

- Self-regulation is a complex function of the nervous system, deeply affected by anything that feels stressful (or relaxing). Being in a hyperaroused (stressed) state can actually affect things like hearing and processing speech, thinking logically and more.

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- The limbic system can recover from stress, but when it becomes chronic, the recovery is slower and more difficult; the gas pedal is always on and the brakes lose resilience.
- The key question shifts from “why can’t he control this impulse?” to “what’s behind this impulse - why now, what has changed?”
- The “interbrain” describes the unique neuro-emotional relationship between parent and child, and is the beginning of the child’s social learning. Parents can use this strong bond to teach their children self-reg skills over time.

The Five Domains

- There are five domains of self-reg: Biological, Emotional, Cognitive, Social, Prosocial.
 - Biological - five steps to self-reg:
 - 1, Read the signs and reframe behavior (know what stress looks like and realize the child is trying despite depletion)
 - 2, Find the stressors, patterns, sources (even if they’re not stressful to you or anyone else)
 - 3, Reduce the stress. Noise is a very common stressor, and any single stressor is exacerbated by an overall stress overload.
 - 4, Reflect for self-awareness. Teach the child how to recognize all these feelings and address them; brain activity actually shifts to calmer states with activities like deep breathing.

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- 5, Respond to discover what's calming - not just "quieting." Know the difference.
- Emotional - physical and emotional experiences are always connected ("nexus") and cycling; Self-Reg always starts with connecting the Biological to the Emotional.
 - "Three R's":
 - Recognize the emotions and rising stress, which can be difficult
 - Reduce the stressors
 - Restore the energy depleted by stressors.
 - Staying connected via the interbrain is critical to helping kids grow emotionally, especially in difficult times. Next, parents help kids express what they're feeling and feel safe/supported in that expression. They learn to 'read the emotional gauge' with our help.
- Cognitive - many areas associated with Executive Function (attentiveness, ignoring distraction, delaying gratification, planning/sequencing, switching focus, etc.)
 - May be most tempting area to think that practice makes perfect, but Self-Reg model goes to the roots. Instead of asking "how can we strengthen capacity for cognition," we ask "WHY is this challenge arising? Why now? What are the hidden factors? How can we strengthen the *roots* of cognition?"
 - Every child working toward Self-Reg must start by getting comfortable in his body - knowing his body's signals. Signs that she doesn't: shivering cold but needing to be

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told to put on a sweater; needing constant reminders to eat when obviously hungry; difficulty recognizing obvious exhaustion at bedtime.

- *Physical exercises link body to brain and help facilitate this comfort with signaling, help notice messages coming from muscles, bones, etc.*
[emphasis added]
- Heightened stress dampens these signals.
- Challenge for adults is to let go of assumptions in order to recognize some of the clues kids give us about their stressors and calming conditions. Examples: a child who wants to do schoolwork lying on the couch may be unconsciously reserving energy for concentration by lessening the physical demand of sitting up straight in a chair; a child who insists on having music play during schoolwork may be up-regulating energy for concentration.
- Remember the goal is not making kids more manageable, but more *self-managed*.
- Social - “neuroception” coined to describe social connectivity, a deep-brain safe-or-scary signal about other people.
 - Social threats set off fight-flight-freeze response.
 - Having to work to understand social situations reduces abilities in all other areas.
 - Reducing fear response socially requires support of teachers, scaffolding of skills and time.

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- Signs of social hyperarousal often look like extreme shyness, hyperactivity, emotional overreactions. Knowing the signs allows us to find stressors and reduce them.
- Prosocial/Empathy - what it's all about: from “me” to “we.”
 - Brains are hardwired for empathy, not required to overcome self-only thinking; empathy expands in children when parents show them the same.
 - Social support reduces stress (even physiologically, as in cortisol levels).
 - But, social connection can be overwhelming for some, causing them to turn away — being exposed to someone else's stress or being expected to put another's needs ahead of one's own can be a stressor itself.

Special Section on Adolescence

- Even more than childhood or adulthood, an unsettled time full of hidden stressors that deplete energy and escalate tension; major brain developments are happening as well (neural growth, synaptic pruning, myelination, essentially rewiring)
- Brain re-org causes changes to its reward system, energy efficiency, neuroception, and more — but risk response is slow to grow.
- Transition from parent-dominant mode of childhood to peer-to-peer mode of adolescence.
- Teen “alarms” are much more sensitive; they are more responsive to negative affect cues and predisposed to see

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even neutral or positive affect as negative. The more their energy is depleted, the more this is true.

- Small group activities are critical - safety in *small* numbers; identification with an idea/goal bigger than the self.
- Antidote: eat real food, sleep more, go for a walk.
 - Real food: obvious nutrition, less obvious rush of neurochemicals released just from chewing.
 - Sleep: reduce blue light exposure, [eliminate completely for 2+ hours before bed]; teens still need at least 9 hours of sleep nightly, often more, [and sleep cycles shift to later hours, creating extra challenge].
 - Walk: gets them off screens and outdoors; benefits cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, digestive/eliminative health; releases tension and anxiety; allows a rush of endorphins; [long-range views improve eye health]; promotes creativity.
- Teenhood important time to shift into self-regulation - knowing their own stressors across all five domains (again, begin with biological by connecting physical to emotional).
 - Time for adults to give teens tools but not do it for them.
- Biology of boredom, dopamine/reward system — “I’m bored” doesn’t really mean boredom; it’s the distress call of too much cortisol in the system.
 - Video games trigger adrenaline, double the amounts of dopamine released, and signal opioid release. Opioids relieve pain and stress, dopamine drives us to find more. But too much dopamine creates dissatisfaction and restlessness.

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- Junk food, like video games, is crafted to stimulate dopamine.
- The dopaminergic cycle is so powerful it can trick us into ignoring natural signals to rest and restore, or to recognize satiety.
- BUT...tuning into cues helps a child/teen/adult take charge. “Willpower” is counterproductive.
- Parent, know thyself — five fundamental parent pressures that can cause their own self-reg problems:
 - Socializing our children: pressure to teach rules, manners, social norms, self-control.
 - Shared anxiety: parents’ empathetic drive to protect/help kids, the close tie to our kids’ emotional lives wears us out.
 - Competitive parenting: in any forum, parents can forget the separateness of children’s success from our own.
 - Navigating ever-present superstimulants: junk food, digital games, social media, etc — the fact that they’re everywhere and we can’t control it is an enormous strain. We may know to divert, not subvert; redirect, not eliminate — but figuring out HOW to do that is pressure.
 - Parenting style labels that oversimplify without helping: they really just name habits we fall into when we are depleted. In our better moments, we can go beyond the labels directly to the causes.

Wrapping up: Ten Ways to See the Signs and Develop the Habit of Self-Reg

1. Look for cues and patterns (child’s stress signals)

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2. Keep your eyes on the target (long-range self-reg itself)
3. Proceed gradually (trial and insight)
4. Get excited when your child begins to initiate (examples: small child rushing to show or tell you something; a teen collapsing on the couch and detailing, unprompted, the events of his day; a tween choosing a walk over a video game)
5. Expect the unexpected (kids are unique even when they seem to have the same needs; sometimes successful things stop working and vice-versa, etc)
6. “Calm” sounds simple but it’s a big word (three components: physical, cognitive, emotional)
7. Don’t go too metacognitive (present info at the child’s developmental level)
8. It’s never too early or too late to start Self-Reg (promise)
9. Consider whose trajectory needs to change (starting point is always how we perceive the child — as someone who’s already doing the best he can with limited resources, or someone who should try harder/think better to mitigate faults)
10. Take it personally (parents have to be in it too, because it’s about relationship)

Parents’ Self-Reg Guide to Self-Care, Sanity, Survival

- Develop self-awareness
- Create conditions that support our own self-reg
- Forgive ourselves
- Aim for calm
- Make time to play and enjoy being together

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