



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

—
Research Centre
for Children and
Families



Practice learnings and resources,
Fostering Lifelong Connections:

Supporting Co-regulation

Presented by:

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Tree of Knowledge

pokerwork on kangaroo skin

Lynette Riley, 2010

We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for country.

What is co-regulation?

Contact with birth family members can potentially reactivate children's trauma and result in emotional dysregulation.

Co-regulation is how adults can use their calm state and undertake strategies to bring a child back into a state of regulation.

Caseworkers can assist children's carers and family members to reflect on and understand their own emotions as well as the trauma responses of children so they can respond sensitively before, during or after family visits.

Case Study

Neville and Grace



Background

Neville and Grace are first time carers of two siblings. They have been very distressed by the high level of emotional dysregulation the children have been expressing before and after family time with their parents. Neville and Grace have been constantly seeking explanations for the children's behaviour. The carers ask the caseworker what had happened to the siblings before they came into their care and suggest to the caseworker that the children should have a temporary break from seeing their parents.

Casework Support

The caseworker validated Neville and Grace's emotions and told them that it is normal to feel upset when the children are upset. However, the caseworker also pointed out that the children can sense when their carers are upset, and this can contribute to their distress. The caseworker suggests that as a response to trauma, the children are struggling to regulate their emotions before and after family time with their parents. She says they can help the children regulate their emotions by focusing on the present and not on the past.

The caseworker then invited the carers to reflect on their own emotions. They recognised that their distress was impacting their ability to model a calm state for the children and committed to practicing mindfulness around family time. The caseworker suggested that they try and do gardening or blow bubbles with the children before and after family time with their parents to bring them back into a calm state.

Co-regulation Practice Learnings



Co-escalating

Caseworker burnout Increase in child's trauma expressions Placement breakdown

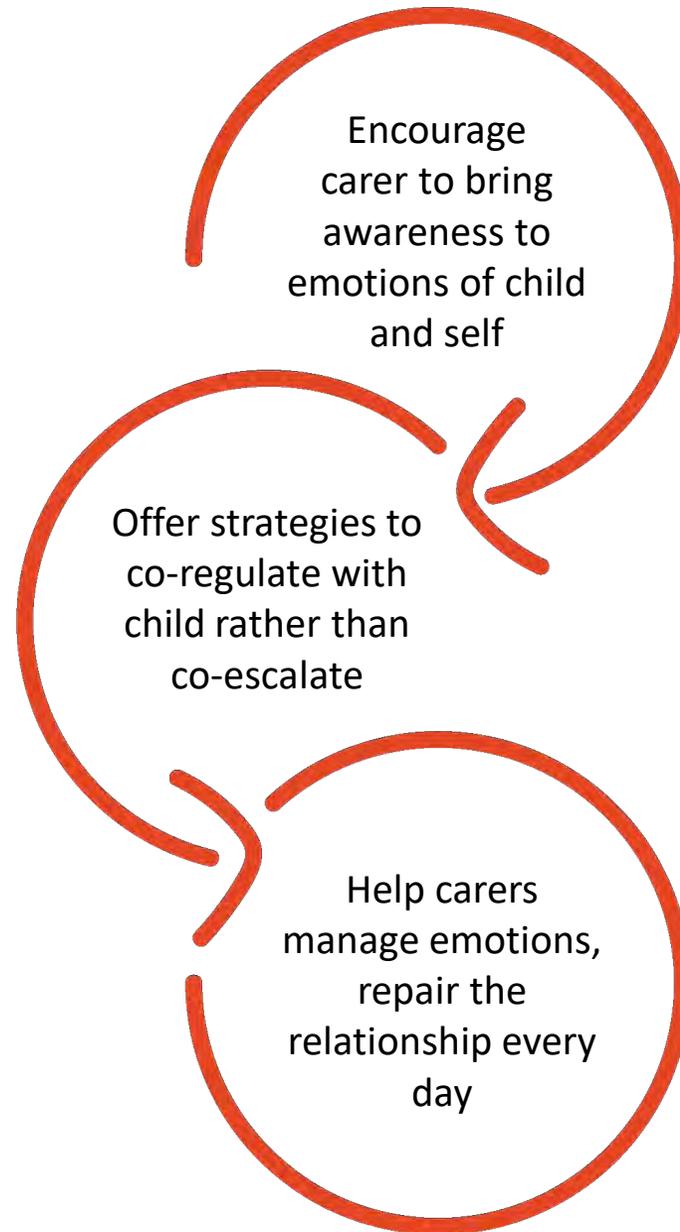
- Encourage carer awareness of own emotions/reactions
- Explore what part their own history is playing
- Normalise and validate their challenges
- When the strategies are triggering for carers, take time to reground with them afterwards

Co-regulating

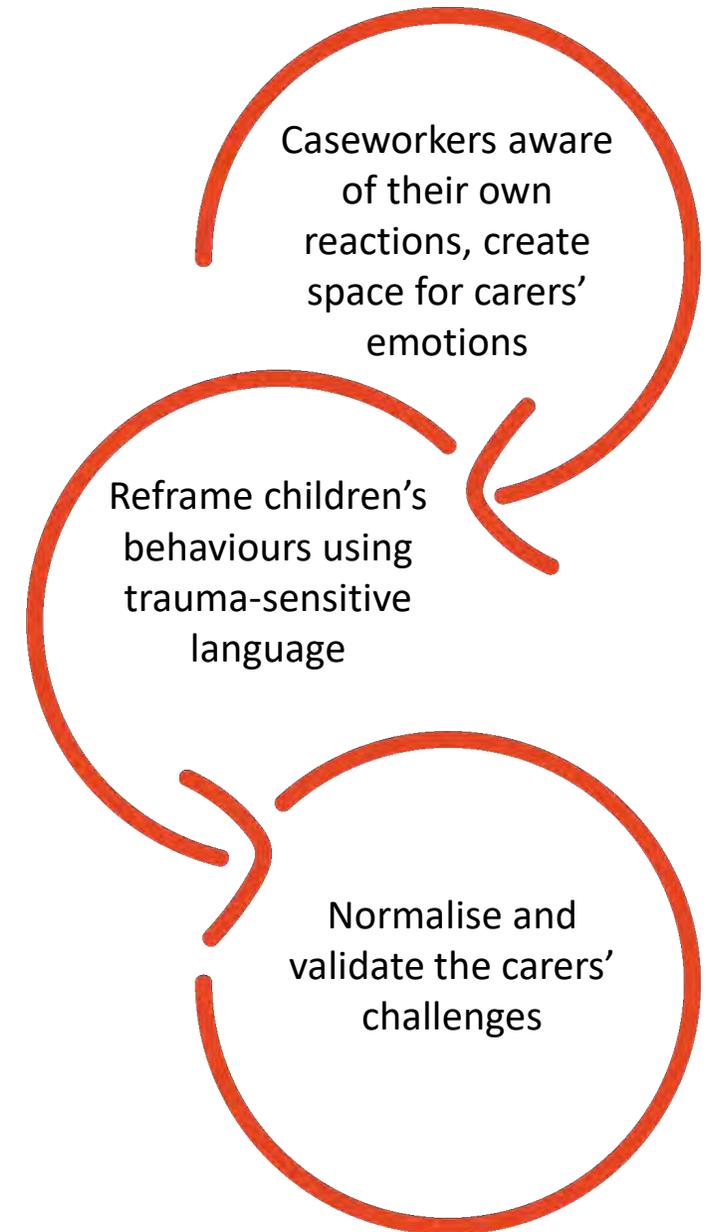
Relational richness Trust and safety Opportunities for repair

Co-regulation

Create a holding environment for the carer so that they can provide that for the child



Parallel Process





TECA

Trauma Expression &
Connection Assessment



Relational Assessments

- Including a narrative where the child's trauma history can be incorporated into explanations and planning.
- Focus on relational safety and state dependence
- Co regulation and dyadic repair

Collaboration with Australian Childhood Foundation on trauma-sensitive resources

Understanding and responding to trauma expressions to support Family Time

Understanding trauma expressions



I feel connected
I am safe

- I can experience joy and spontaneity
- I am able to seek comfort and connection
- I am open to being taught and to learning
- I am able to negotiate with others
- I can demonstrate empathy
- I do not show obvious signs of stress



I feel a threat
I am becoming stressed

- I may feel fatigued
- I may have a headache
- I might be nauseous
- I may withdraw from activities that are usually a source of joy
- I may feel more afraid of being separated from safe adults
- I may show uncharacteristic emotion or behaviours
- I may lose my creativity
- I may seek more structure and clarity from others



I feel alarmed
I am distressed

- I may feel deep sadness
- I may be very frustrated
- I may have disrupted sleep
- I may have changes in diet and the need for food
- I may find it hard to trust people
- I become more attentive to time and routines and am unable wait
- I prefer more structure and clarity of information



I feel overwhelmed
I am going to explode

- I may display anger, rage, terror
- I may want to collapse
- I may experience a loss of empathy
- I may be reactive and take big risks
- I may hurt myself and others
- I may find it hard to use words
- I find it hard to control my body
- I enter **Fight, Flight, Freeze** or **Fawn** states



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 This resource was co-designed with expert-by-experience, Jacqui Kettle.
 Developed as part of the ARC Linkage project *Fostering Lifelong Connections for Children in Permanent Care* (LP18010332)



Scan this code for more ideas and resources:

Understanding and responding to trauma expressions to support Family Time

How a safe relationship can support co-regulation

Fight

Activities to help make the body safe to inhabit

- Blow a feather across a table and see whose travels the furthest
- Make ribbon circles of different sizes, go quick and then go slow
- Wrap resistance bands around your own and your child's waist to see how close or far they can stretch
- Wrap resistance bands around your own and your child's feet and see how high or wide they can go
- Be a lava lamp and sway or bob up and down
- Take turns falling into a bean bag and catch your child before they land
- Get into the garden and plant, dig, sow seeds, weed
- Make shaving cream statues
- Wash or brush a pet

Freeze

Activities to help move out of shut down

- Wrap child in a blanket and gently pull them around the floor
- Lay on lambswool and make snow angels
- Brush teeth with electric toothbrush
- Spin on an office chair
- Hold a heat/cool pack and talk about places and things that match the temperature
- Sway your child gently in a hammock or hold them on either side by their arms and legs
- Play pillow fights
- Make sandcastles
- Take a big breath in then let it out with a big roar



Activities to help ground in the present

- Use a torch to spotlight objects in the dark
- Place string on the ground and pretend to 'walk the tightrope'
- Sit opposite each other and twist to the right and left together
- Count steps as you walk backwards to an agreed spot

- Make a thick smoothie together and drink it through a straw
- Chew strong chewing gum or Minties lollies
- Light candles and blow them out – try all at once, one at a time
- Wrap each other up in toilet paper like a mummy and then bust out

Activities to build confidence to reduce need to appease

- Look in a mirror at each other and make the same facial expressions
- Plan a menu together for the week
- Award a 'Medal of the Day' to each other and say what you noticed to warrant this
- Ask each other to choose a favourite from two similar things: Coke/Fanta, McDonald's/KFC, bath/shower, etc.
- Move into warrior pose and keep body strong and still
- Why not come up with your own ideas? You could try karaoke, have a sing-along, do the Hokey Pokey, play dress-ups or do line-dancing!

Flight

Fawn



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Words Matter: Trauma sensitive language with children

Trauma is expressed through behaviours not language can mask fear or shame

Stress responses are known as 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze' and 'fawn' can resemble anti-social behaviours

Negative language blames children for their trauma is internalised by children and leads to negative labels

What might be happening in the moment

Disrespectful and rude

- Urge to push bad feelings away
- Testing strength of connection
- Seeking belonging with peers
- Sense of shame
- Sense of danger

Negatively charged language

Defiant and ignorant

- Fearing separation from caregiver
- Fearing change or transitions
- Attempting to establish predictability
- Trying to predict adult behaviours

Manipulative

- May be using early survival patterns that previously kept them safe
- Imitating early adult role models
- Difficulty articulating feelings
- Attempting to keep adults distanced
- Seeking power when they feel endangered

Disruptive

- Feeling unworthy of connection
- Avoiding a feeling of shame
- Feeling anxiety in the situation
- Attempting to regain mastery over a situation
- Attempting to compensate for poor social or learning skills

Aggressive and oppositional

- Feeling unworthy of love and attachment
- Feeling stuck in rigidity or chaos
- Divided loyalty and fear of betrayal
- Attempting to create a distraction or to protect themselves

Risk taking

- Feeling unworthy or unloved
- Trying to reduce distress
- May be self-regulating in the form of self-harm or risk to others
- Seeking power, approval or affirmation of strength

Preferable language

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Frustrated
- ✓ Testing relationship

- ✓ Seeking safety
- ✓ Resourceful
- ✓ Self-soothing

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Over-stimulated

Preferable language

- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Shutdown
- ✓ Seeking control
- ✓ Testing relationship

- ✓ Distressed
- ✓ Ashamed
- ✓ Lacking confidence
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Unhappy

- ✓ Seeking belonging
- ✓ Afraid
- ✓ Fear of loneliness
- ✓ Self-protection
- ✓ Limit testing

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Australian Childhood Foundation

Taking the journey toward a trauma-informed approach to Family Time

Key messages for moving toward trauma-informed practice

Stable and therapeutic relationships are the starting point for trauma healing. Family Time offers children and families a chance to heal and enjoy healthy relationships when they get the support they need.

Help children regain a sense of control by allowing them to make choices about Family Time such as when and how it happens, who drives them and what music plays in the car, whether they talk and what about.

Foster collaboration with adults from both families by bringing the focus back to their shared connection and love for the child rather than differences between them.

Stay in touch with families between visits. A check-in phone call before Family Time can show you care and debriefing after can help families reflect on what went well and plan for next time.

Give adults the tools to co-regulate with the child. Carers and relatives can model a calm state and help children regain a safe connection to their body using play and body-based activities during Family Time.

Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication. When language and gestures are perceived as interrogative it mobilises fear and shame. Keep a neutral tone of voice, use non-judging words and maintain relaxed and welcoming body language to open a dialogue.

Lead difficult conversations with children's families to adjust Family Time plans to better suit the child's needs. Model calm, respectful communication that encourages open discussion of other options.

Physical spaces affect emotional safety. Create inviting spaces for safe relationships to flourish wherever visits occur. How children travel to and from visits affects their experience of Family Time. Minimise any changes to time or driver at short notice.

Child wellbeing is the core aim of Family Time. Keep in mind that the purpose is to give children a chance to thrive in relationships, not to schedule an obligatory event.

Family Time plans should be as unique and dynamic as the child. Take into account their interests, culture, age and developmental stage (which may not match expectations for their chronological age).

Make time for reflection after each visit. Ask yourself if you can do more to build on the child and family strengths and what needs to happen to improve future Family Time experiences.

Co-design with two mothers and in consultation with Expert Reference Group members

Light in the Dark

Bringing your feelings into the light so you can learn to heal

Emotional pain is like carrying a heavy weight. You may want the weight to be lifted or fear it will be with you forever. Feeling like this for a long time stresses the body. Understanding the early warning signs of stress allows you to take charge of your life.

Small things can trigger big reactions

- You get stressed over lost keys or running late
- You have trouble sleeping
- You are in the emotional 'early warning' zone
- You may say and do things you regret
- You may have conflict with other people

Things related to your child will trigger big reactions

- Family time is cancelled at short notice or goes badly
- You feel grief and pain rising to the surface
- You are entering the emotional 'amber' zone
- You may feel distress, panic or numbing
- People may think you are being unreasonable

You are feeling calm and positive

- You can cope with everyday upsets
- You are in the emotional 'green' zone
- You enjoy today and feel optimistic about tomorrow

Things that reignite your pain can be overwhelming

- It might be Mother's/Father's Day or your child's birthday
- You feel the weight of anger, shame and fear return

You have entered the emotional 'red zone'

- Your reactions become unpredictable
- Your actions may frighten you and other people

Ready to explode

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Light in the Dark

Powering the healing journey

Wherever you are today, you can take steps today to start your journey and get the support you deserve.

Parents can feel like they are always waiting for something:

- * for court dates
- * for support services
- * to see their child
- * to bring their child home

It is not a sign of weakness to need to work on your emotional self. It takes a lot of strength to do this and to ask for help.

What you can do for yourself today:

- * Spend time with people who understand your pain
- * Spend time in nature or on Country to feel calm and connected
- * Do small, good things for yourself (eat a nourishing meal, listen to your favourite song)
- * Notice even the small moments when you feel strong and resilient

What you can learn about yourself today:

- * What do you notice about yourself when you feel calm and connected?
- * What do others notice about you when you seem calm and connected?
- * What piece of advice have you been given that really meant something?
- * What small step can you take now that would change your situation?

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Nourishing the first spark of connection

Remember that there is enough love to go around

Children thrive when they are surrounded by people who love them. When parents know what is happening for their child, they can support them and the adults around them to make the most of Family Time.

Your child may be trying to:

- Adjust to changed routines
- Understand where they belong
- Avoid upsetting you
- Sustain friendships
- Stay in touch with family
- Express difficult emotions
- Work out what they want from Family Time

What they may be feeling:

Fear, Sadness, Guilt, Anxiety, Shame, Confusion

What you might be feeling:

Anxiety, Grief, Shame, Guilt, Anger, Sadness

Parents can help by:

- Telling them you are proud of them
- Reassuring them that you are okay
- Celebrating the positives with them
- Avoiding promises you can't keep
- Being consistent
- Asking what they want to do
- Involving their carers
- Focusing on making time together enjoyable
- Sharing photos, drawings and letters
- Giving honest, age-appropriate answers to questions
- Bringing a toy or something they can take home

Strengthening all the sparks of connection

How parents can support the adults who care for their child and improve Family Time

There are things parents can do to show support for their child and strengthen important connections at Family Time.

Your child's carer may be:

- Balancing care needs of multiple children
- Lacking information about your child's history
- Getting to know your child
- Following agency rules
- Lacking certainty about how long your child will stay with them

What they may be feeling:

Uncertain, Stressed, Helpless, Overwhelmed, Protective

Parents can help by:

- Suggesting a meeting with carer and caseworker
- Showing you want to help your child settle in
- Being open about your goals and feelings
- Listening to their goals and feelings
- Suggesting that you have a communication book
- Sending letters/photos to update them and your child

Your child's caseworker may be:

- Balancing the needs of multiple families
- Experiencing burnout and stress
- Continuing to develop skills and knowledge
- Facing time or resource pressures
- Coping with staffing shortages

What they may be feeling:

Frustrated that they can't make things better, Pressured by the agency, Blamed by families for past decisions

Parents can help by:

- Suggesting how to support you and your child
- Allowing them time to respond to your queries
- Keeping records of agreements
- Being open about your concerns
- Giving details of your culture, values, beliefs
- Updating them on changes to your situation
- Asking for advance notice of caseworker changes



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Reflective exercise

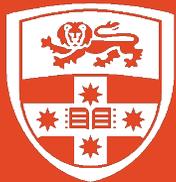
- Download the 'Words Matter' tip sheet
- Look at the negatively charged words and reflect on a time that you heard one used to describe a child you know
 - What might have been happening for the child in the moment?
 - What language could you have used instead?

Connect With Us

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