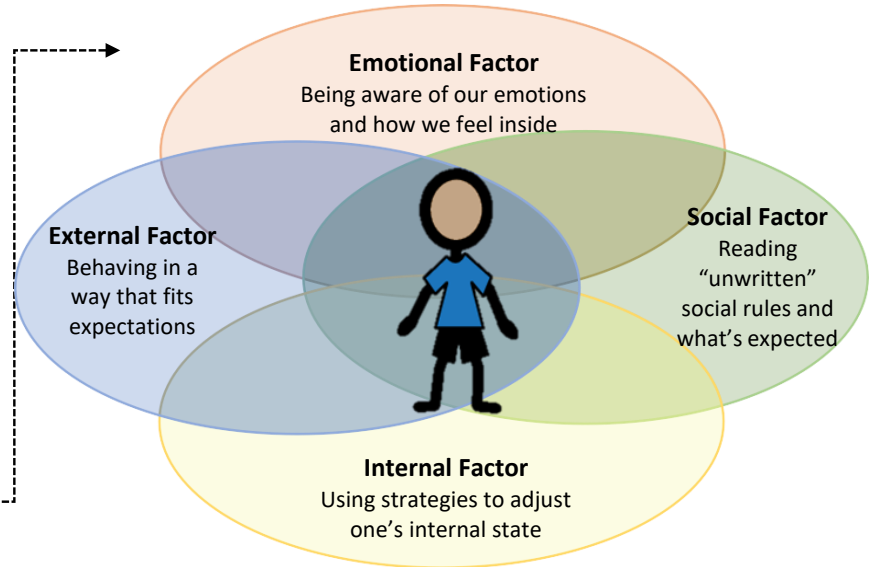


What is REGULATION... and why is it SO HARD?

An Occupational Therapy Perspective

What Is 'Regulation'?

Regulation is the ability to monitor and change your level of arousal to be appropriate for the task at hand. Regulation can seem like one skill gained at a particular time along a child's developmental path. This can make us think that as children get older, they'll also get better at regulating. In fact, regulation is a lot more complex and dynamic! Many different things must come together in order for a child (or adult) to be able to regulate. These include...



How Regulation Develops

There's a lot going on! No wonder regulation is so tricky. Early experiences, interactions with and modeling from caregivers, and the child's own temperament create the blueprint for regulation. Regulation is a skill that develops over the life span as children grow, learn, interact with others, and collect life experiences. This is supported by ongoing development of communication skills that equip children with more strategies to process, understand, and express emotions – behaviour is communication!

Development of Regulation (developmental stages, not ages)					
Infants	Preschool	Early years	Elementary to Middle School	Middle School to Highschool	Adulthood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Building blocks of regulation start shortly after birth -Dependent on caregiver to regulate -Connecting and building secure attachment through interactions with caregiver -Start learning to self soothe and control impulses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Burst of skills, leading to more independence with regulation -Still highly reliant on co-regulator -Have difficulty with impulse control, labeling emotions, interpreting thoughts and feelings of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Begin to develop the ability to have two competing feelings in social situations and weighing them out against each other -Becoming better equipped to inhibit emotion-driven impulses based on social goals as they mature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Time to practice: seeing what works or doesn't, moving from big four feelings (happy, mad, sad and scared) to more nuanced emotions -Gain greater independence through practice but still requires a co-regulator at times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Regulation skills tend to dip as a burst of brain development and hormones occur -As teens take on additional roles in life, they are able to practice and hone their skills, learning what is appropriate in different contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Now a true sense of "self"-regulation becomes attainable; however the brain is still maturing as it takes three decades to fully develop these skills

While it takes until adulthood for all the pieces to come together, even adults can find it hard to manage big feelings and cope with stressors depending on the day and what is going on in their lives. Think of how you behave when you are...

Overwhelmed -- Running Late -- Hungry or Tired -- Feeling Uncertain

The Role of the Co-regulator

Not every child will follow the developmental path outlined above and this is okay. Every child is unique and there really is no such thing as 'normal' development. As parents, teachers, and caregivers, it can be easy for us to see where the child could be or where we want their skills to be. However, we need to meet our children where they're at, while accepting them as they are and learning together. This is where co-regulation comes in! A co-regulator is a role model who guides a child through the process of:

- recognizing their emotions/body states,
- looking for and understanding context clues (i.e., answering the question "Why might I feel this way?"),
- coming up with calming strategies, and
- reflecting on the impact of those strategies.

Co-regulation can help at *all* stages of development. What you do will change over time and depend on the individual child. Our job as a co-regulator is to be observant, mindful, engaged, responsive, and adaptable. ***Come from a place of curiosity - you might be surprised! There is always a 'why'.*** An important part of being a co-regulator is to 'hold space' for someone's emotions, which can be difficult and uncomfortable. It is important for the caregiver to do a self-check, to see if they are in the best emotional state to help regulate the child. If you feel like you are not in the 'just right state', having another team member to help or having a back-up plan is a good strategy.

Consider the analogy, 'co-regulation is like paddling a canoe' - along a river which is constantly flowing, changing, and influenced by the environment.

