

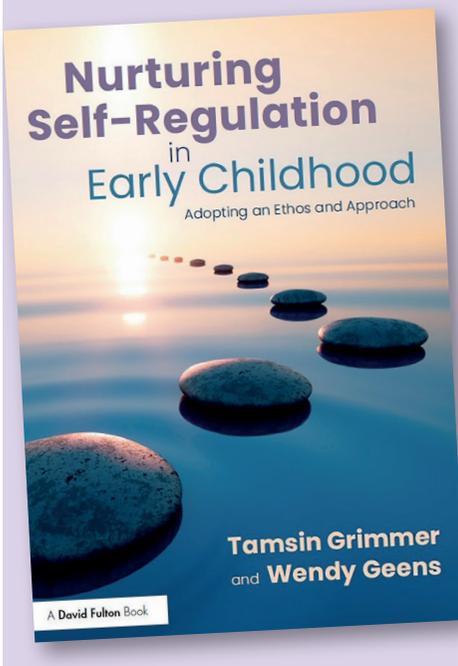


Tamsin Grimmer's new book

Nurturing Self-Regulation in Early Childhood: Adopting an Ethos and Approach by Tamsin Grimmer and Wendy Geens.

The authors explore how young children develop self-regulation and offer practical guidance on helping them to manage their feelings and behaviour. They consider the skills, attitudes and dispositions children need to be able to self-regulate and how their wellbeing and self-esteem can affect their ability to do this.

Grimmer and Geens show how schools and settings can adopt an ethos where self-regulation permeates their whole provision.



Co-regulation

There is an important supportive role for adults working with young children

Imagine this scene: *you are starting work a little later today because you have to attend an inset course this morning. You rush to get the children ready for school, and your twelve-year-old realises he has a food technology lesson and needs to bring in all the ingredients for a Victoria sponge. You manage to find everything he needs, thinking, "I guess I won't have omelette for lunch after all." Then there's a scream as your younger child has spilled cereal milk all over a clean uniform and the floor. You manage to clean it up, pour more milk on the cornflakes and find another uniform. The phone rings as you are leaving the house and your elderly neighbour asks you to buy some groceries because she has had a fall and cannot leave the house. So, after walking the children to school, you pop into the shop and get the bits needed. When you finally arrive at the training, you are five minutes late. After the start of the day, that's pretty good going. Unfortunately, you are met with a sarcastic remark from your manager who says, "What time do you call this?" The comment does not go down well. You feel your blood pressure rising, and you leave the room. Your friend rushes after you and calms you down, saying that you look upset. She asks you about your*

morning. After a few more minutes and with a strong cup of coffee inside you, you re-join the training, smiling and much calmer.

We all have days like this. Sometimes things happen beyond our control, and emotions get the better of us. At this moment, we are dysregulated. That is, we feel stressed, out of sorts and not 'OK'. As Dan Siegal would put it, we have 'flipped our lid', and the downstairs brain has taken over. In other words, we are in 'freeze, fight or flight' mode. We cannot think rationally until we have calmed down. Generally, we can do this quickly. In the example above, our friend helped us to do it. She acted as a co-regulator, helping us to regain that sense of calm.

Young children have times when they are dysregulated too, and they do not yet know how to deal with these powerful feelings. They need us to co-regulate them, to coach them 'in the moment', and help them to feel calmer. We do this by becoming attuned to their emotional states, and then acknowledging and validating their feelings. Labelling what they feel and why can also be useful, as many children do not know what these feelings are and how they should respond. Wondering is a useful technique. For example,



“You look sad. I wonder if you are feeling sad because your daddy has gone to work.” Then we follow this with a suggestion of what we can do. “When I feel sad, I sometimes need a cuddle. Would you like a cuddle?” In this way, we are helping the child by labelling their feelings and offering a way forward.

To become adults who can co-regulate children’s emotional states, we need to have built strong, loving, authentic relationships with them. Our children have to trust us and know that we have their best interests at heart. We must ensure our children feel safe and secure in our setting. It can help to have a consistent routine and predictable boundaries, so that children know what is expected of them. Within this environment, adults can help children to regulate their emotions and teach them strategies to use in the future.

Therefore, before we as adults deal with a child’s challenging behaviour, or overpowering emotions, we need to ensure the child feels loved, safe and secure. There is a well-known phrase in therapeutic parenting circles: ‘connection before correction’, which reminds us that before we can even think about discipline, we must have built a loving, trusting, reciprocal relationship with our children. The word discipline can sometimes be unhelpful in an early childhood context. It is often associated with rewards and punishment, which have no place in our settings. When we think about discipline from a more Biblical perspective, however,

Special offer

Tamsin Grimmer has kindly offered a copy of her new book on self-regulation to be the prize in a draw. She is an early years consultant and author of books including *Developing a Loving Pedagogy*, *Calling all Superheroes* and *Supporting Behaviour and Emotions*. The new book is due to be published in the Autumn.

To enter the draw, please visit our Facebook page (@loveearlyyears) and click the email button to send through your contact details. Alternatively, send your details by email to info@loveearlyyears.com.

it can be a helpful word to use. Christian discipline is about teaching and instruction, not punishment. According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, the words discipline and disciple have the same root, stemming from the Latin word for pupil: *discipulus*. If we consider a definition in this context, discipline is about instruction, learning a trade, coaching and moulding yourself to be like the master. When we act as a co-regulator, we are coaching our children in the moment, and teaching them about how to act and react when they experience certain things or feel a particular way.

The role of the adult

The role of the adult is vital and must be a calming influence, so de-escalating the situation, not making it worse. This reminds me of the verse in Ephesians which encourages parents not to wind their children up or treat them harshly: **Parents, do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry. Instead, raise them with Christian discipline and instruction** (Ephesians 6:4, *Good News Translation*). We need

to role model how to act when experiencing strong emotions. We have to create an emotionally literate environment, where we use emotion language daily, and use strategies like emotion coaching and problem-solving to turn challenging incidents into opportunities to learn.

Unfortunately, our children will face challenges and difficulties in their lives. They will have days when things threaten to overwhelm them, and we aim to teach children resilience and help them develop self-regulation so that they remain calm and cope in adversity. Research suggests that children who can self-regulate are well-adjusted, socially competent, cognitively more able and ultimately more successful in life. Through co-regulation, we can play our part in helping children get there.



Tamsin Grimmer