

Child Welfare Professionals Guide: How to Support Older Youth with Foster Care Experience through Co-Regulation

What is Co-Regulation?

Think about a time when you:

- Connected with a young person to help them feel heard, safe, and empowered to achieve their goals and solve their problems.
- Helped a young person understand and accept their feelings, gain perspective, persist through challenges, think before reacting in order to make good decisions, and identify their hopes and dreams.
- Supported a young person in staying connected to families and communities, being accountable to others, finding resources, asking for help, and creating healthy boundaries, routines, and environments.

This support is called [co-regulation](#).

Co-regulation is when caring adults nurture positive youth development by enacting three key types of support:

Intentional and Developmentally-Informed Day-to-Day Interactions

- promote self-regulation skills through reminding, modeling positive feedback, and facilitating self-reflection

Caring, Consistent, Responsive Relationships

- address youth's needs in the moment,
- validate their experiences,
- express interest and respect, and
- demonstrate commitment to them through challenges

Co-Creation of Supportive Environments

- connect with people and places that support youth's values, goals, strengths, and
- build routines for health, wellbeing, and self-sufficiency

**Every interaction
is an opportunity
for co-regulation.
— Maximize the
moment!**

Co-regulation is a process that doesn't happen overnight.

What does co-regulation look like?

- **Staying genuinely engaged** over time despite challenges that will arise.
- **Focusing on a young person's strengths** and resilience to help them build a positive self-narrative and self-identity.
- **Providing opportunities** to develop skills and competencies, balancing safety with opportunity for growth.
- **Being attuned** to the young person's needs in the moment and respecting their lived experiences and values.
- **Approaching a young person with compassion and flexibility**, understanding they may have a history of trauma.
- Helping the young person **self-reflect on experiences** to gain perspective and learn from successes and setbacks.
- **Collaboratively creating routines and environments** that support the young person's identity, goals, values, and well-being, and empower them to take more of the lead over time.
- Connecting the young person to **supportive peer networks and resources** like foster care alumni who can model pathways of success and affinity groups where their identities will be affirmed.
- **Interacting in intentional ways** by giving your full attention to a young person.
- **Promoting youth's skills and competencies** through modeling, reminding them to

use these skills, providing feedback in the moment, and encouraging self-reflection in a way that helps them learn and grow.

Why is co-regulation important for older adolescents in foster care?

- Youth who have been in foster care demonstrate many strengths and resilience, but may need additional co-regulation supports due to trauma experiences. Opportunities for co-regulation support can also be disrupted by separation from families and placement changes.
- Through co-regulation, caring adults (including additional professional support when needed) can help youth build the skills, connect with resources, and strengthen positive beliefs they need to maximize their adult capabilities.
- Co-regulation can also help buffer youth from other adversities they may encounter in the future when they are working towards things that are important to them.
- Just like helping someone to climb a steep mountain, youth need guides to make their way to the top, and a shelter when the weather is too dangerous to be out on their own.
- This doesn't mean carrying their load for them or giving them a ride to the top. Rather, caring adults can step in and help them find their way back to their path when they get lost or discouraged.



Based on what we learned from a [literature review and program scan](#), co-regulation can be used to support youth to:



Build healthy relationships and boundaries



Regulate their emotions and manage stress



Learn and grow from experience



Feel a greater sense of agency and empowerment in their lives



Promote a sense of belonging aligned with their social and cultural identity

How can you strengthen your own co-regulation capacity?

Working as a professional in the child welfare system can be emotionally and physically draining, and it is normal to lose your patience. Co-regulation can be hard when you feel tired, overwhelmed, or burnt-out.

To build and strengthen your co-regulation capacity, use professional resources for workplace wellbeing and try these tips:

- **Notice your emotional reactions** when you are feeling drained, irritable, or overwhelmed. Working with youth who have experienced trauma is stressful and can lead to secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Identify and be mindful of your own triggers.
- **Call on supports** before challenges become a crisis. Have regular conversations with your supervisor and other staff about how work affects you. Normalize talking about these experiences and strategies for coping.
- **Build up and invest in caring adults** in a young person's life. Supporting other adults (like extended family, foster parents, or coaches) in a young person's life is beneficial to everyone because it improves supports for youth and increases collective co-regulation capacity.
- **Take time to care for yourself.** Prioritize time for activities you enjoy and find relaxing so you can recharge your own emotional battery.
- **Be kind to yourself** if interactions don't go the way you want. Recognize opportunities for learning together as you navigate difficult conversations and situations. Acknowledging that you don't have all the answers can help youth accept their own mistakes.

Questions for Reflection:

How are we helping youth reframe their personal narrative and develop hopes and dreams for the future?

How are we recognizing youth resilience and strengths, particularly culturally-based assets?

What are we doing to promote a sense of belonging across all settings youth encounter?

Co-Regulation Conversations

As illustrated here, caring adults can engage youth in supportive conversations in many different ways, depending on the situation and the young person's needs. Specific examples of conversations are shown on the next page.

Co-creating Supportive Environments

Engage in supportive conversation by asking open-ended questions such as:

- “Who can provide the resources, opportunities, and supports you want?”
- “Who can you connect with who has had a similar challenge and gotten through it?”
- “What situations and routines make it easier to reach your goals?”
- “What would motivate you and help you stay accountable to your plan?”

TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- Asking curious and intentional questions can support youth in building environments to foster success.
- Reaching out to others may be a difficult skill for youth with foster care experience, but one that can bring great rewards.

Day-to-Day Interactions

Engage in supportive conversation by asking open-ended questions such as:

- “What do you want to see happen?”
- “What are some possible negatives that you want to consider?”

TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- Avoid questions that imply criticism, like “Why did you do that?”
- Let them take the lead in solving their problems.
- Sometimes just being a supportive presence is enough to help youth manage tough emotions.
- Asking curious and intentional questions can help youth make good decisions in the moment.

Caring, Consistent, and Responsive Relationships

Engage in supportive conversation by asking open-ended questions such as:

- “What might be helpful from me?”
- “What do you need?”
- “What might support you in...?”

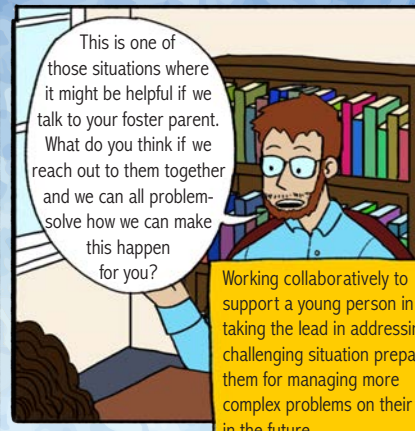
TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- Listen patiently and validate youth's feelings and experiences, even if you disagree with their actions.
- Sometimes support means respecting youth enough to be direct with them about your concerns.
- Youth with foster care experience may reject or test those they need the most.

Respond to Youth Seeking Autonomy in the Face of System Constraints

Day-to-Day Interactions

Working collaboratively to support a young person in addressing a challenging situation prepares them for managing more complex problems on their own in the future.



Working collaboratively to support a young person in taking the lead in addressing a challenging situation prepares them for managing more complex problems on their own in the future.

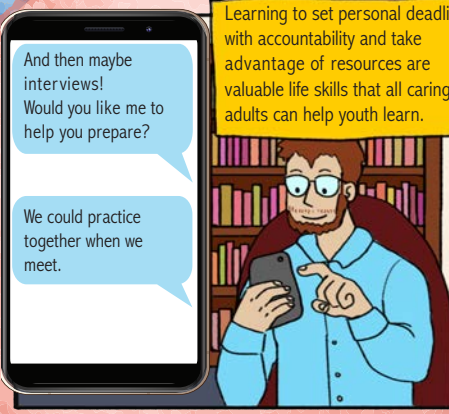
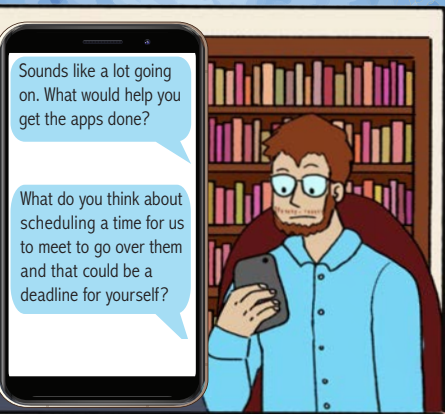
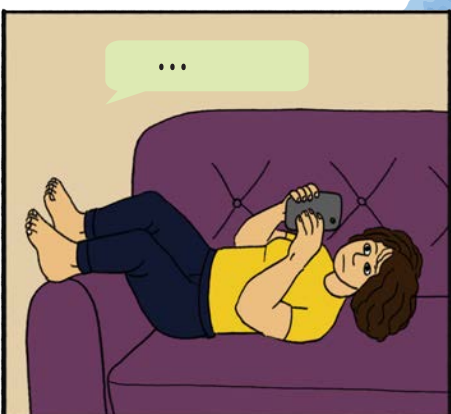
Relationships

Environments

Supporting Youth to Pursue Their Goals

Relationships

Supportive conversations can empower young adults to take steps to accomplish their goals.



Learning to set personal deadlines with accountability and take advantage of resources are valuable life skills that all caring adults can help youth learn.

Environments

Day-to-Day Interactions

Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience

This tip sheet builds from a body of work supported by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that describes how self-regulation can be applied as a framework for promoting health and well-being for youth, with particular value for those who have experienced an accumulation of acute and chronic stressors. OPRE contracted with the Child Trends Team (Desiree Murray, Hannah Rackers, Karin Malm, and Kristin Sepulveda) for The Building Co-Regulation Capacity to Support Positive Development for Youth with Foster Care Experience project. The purpose of this project is to provide an overview of the available research evidence and practice relevant to caring adults who work with and interface with these youth and young adults. The report from that project is the foundation for this tip sheet designed for caregivers of older youth in foster care. The strategies in this tip sheet are based on theory and evidence from the report, but have not yet been tested for effectiveness.

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Visit OPRE's website for a detailed [final report](#). Tip sheets for [Kinship Caregivers](#), [Foster Families](#), and [Caring Adults](#) are also available. This tip sheet is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. This tip sheet and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.



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Project Officers: Kelly Jedd McKenzie & Aleta Lynn Meyer, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; Catherine Health, Children's Bureau; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.

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