

HOW TO CO-REGULATE WITH A CHILD



REDUCE DEMANDS

When a child is overwhelmed, their thinking brain is not fully working. Take away instructions, questions, and pressure until they settle.



SHOW SAFETY WITH YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Soft posture. Relaxed shoulders. Slow movements. Your body shows the child that they are safe.



HELP THEIR BREATHING MATCH YOURS

Model slow, steady breaths. Children often copy slow breathing when they see it.



YOU ARE THE ANCHOR. REGULATE YOURSELF FIRST.

Children borrow the adult's calm. Slow your breathing. Lower your voice. Settle your body before you try to help them.



USE A CALM, STEADY VOICE

Speak slowly and simply. Your pace helps guide their pace. Short sentences work best.



STAY CLOSE, BUT NOT TOO CLOSE

Some children want you close. Others need space but want you to stay nearby. Follow their cues.



OFFER COMFORT THEY CAN ACCEPT

Comfort can be a blanket, a quiet space, a favourite object, or a hug if they choose it. Comfort helps the child's brain calm down.



NAME THE STATE, NOT THE BEHAVIOUR

Say things like: "You are feeling overwhelmed." or "This feels too much for your body." This helps them feel understood and not judged.



WAIT FOR THEIR BODY TO CALM BEFORE TALKING

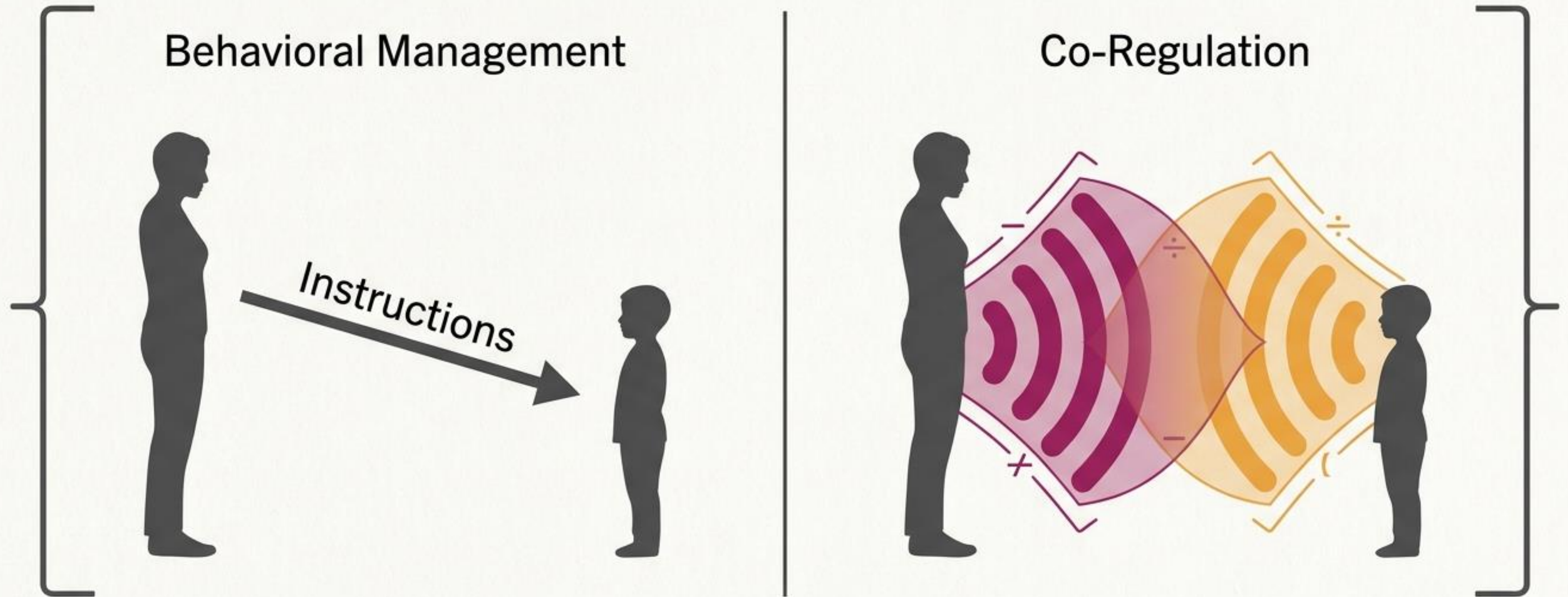
Do not teach or correct the child while they are upset. Once settled, talk through what happened in simple steps.



BUILD COPING SKILLS WHEN CALM

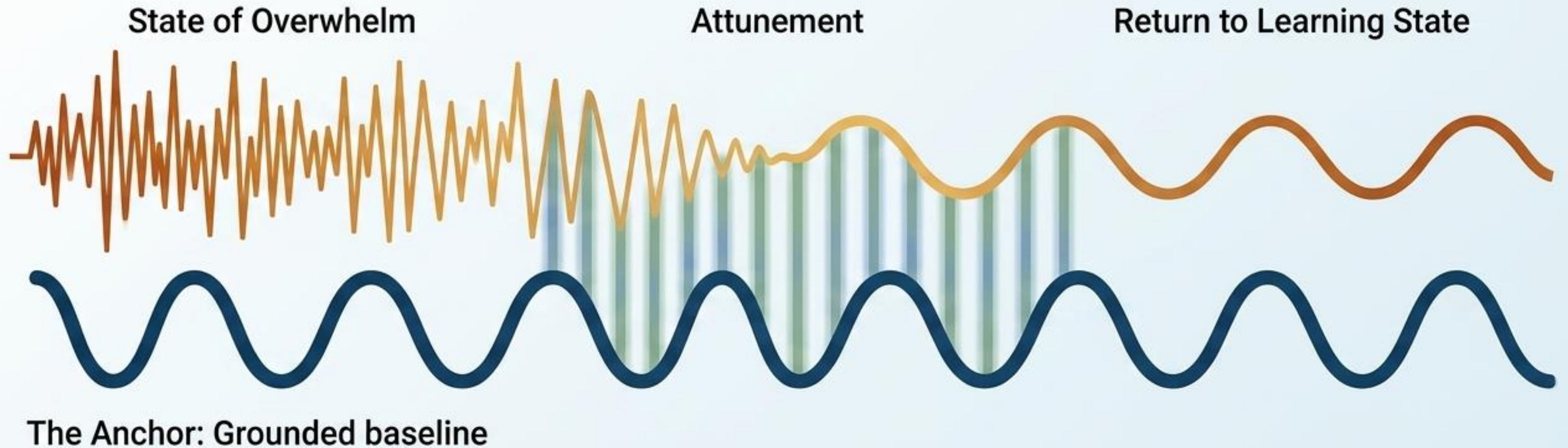
When the child is calm, teach simple breathing, taking breaks, moving their body, and asking for help. Co regulation comes first, and self regulation grows with time and practice.

We are interacting nervous systems, not just exchanging words.



A child's nervous system is fundamentally porous. They do not self-regulate; they "borrow" the regulatory state of the nearest dominant adult.

Neural Resonance: The Biology of Calm



Calm meets Calm. The adult's grounded nervous system absorbs and neutralizes the child's dysregulation.

Attunement Versus Technique



Attunement means **accurately noticing** and **responding** to another person's emotional state while remaining **grounded** ourselves.



It is different from simply following a protocol.



One statement may feel deeply **comforting**.

Two adults may say exactly the same words:
“I can see that you’re upset.”



The difference is not the script—it is the **relationship** and the **authenticity** behind it.



The other may feel **dismissive** or **mechanical**.

Attuned adults:



notice subtle changes in behaviour



adjust their expectations to the student's current state



remain flexible



communicate genuine curiosity



respond rather than react



Students do not need perfect adults.

They need adults who are emotionally present enough to notice them. ♡

The Anatomy of a Regulated Presence

AWARENESS, CALM, AND CONNECTION IN ACTION



Mind (Awareness):

Self-reflective. Willing to explore what might be happening rather than jumping to consequences.



Body (Posture):

Soft posture, relaxed shoulders. Non-threatening proximity.



Lungs (Breath):

Slow, steady breathing.
(Children borrow the adult's calm.)



Face (Expression):

Receptive, relaxed facial muscles.
(Students constantly scan environments for cues of safety.)



Voice (Tone):

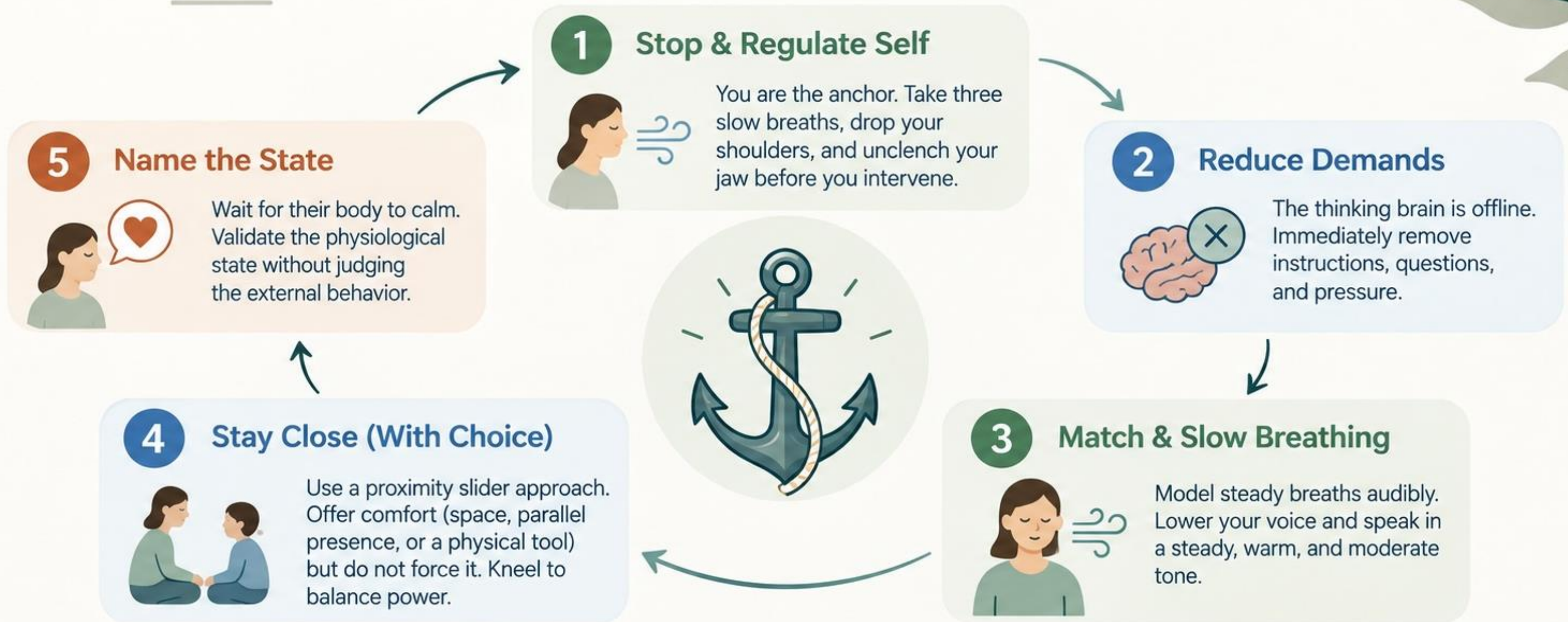
Speaking slowly and warmly.
Tone of voice is often more powerful than the words chosen.



Co-regulation doesn't happen in a manual.

It happens in the hallway, the classroom, the cafeteria line.

Layer 2: The Anchor Protocol for in-the-moment crisis.



Co-regulation creates the conditions for calm to return.
When adults regulate, children can regulate.

The Geometry of De-Escalation



Line of Sight

Maintain visual contact for supervision and safety, even from afar.



Proximity

Keep a safe, respectful distance honoring individual tolerance. Ask: "Can I sit next to you?" If no, widen the distance.



Stance

Adopt a non-threatening posture. No crossed arms; no hands on hips.



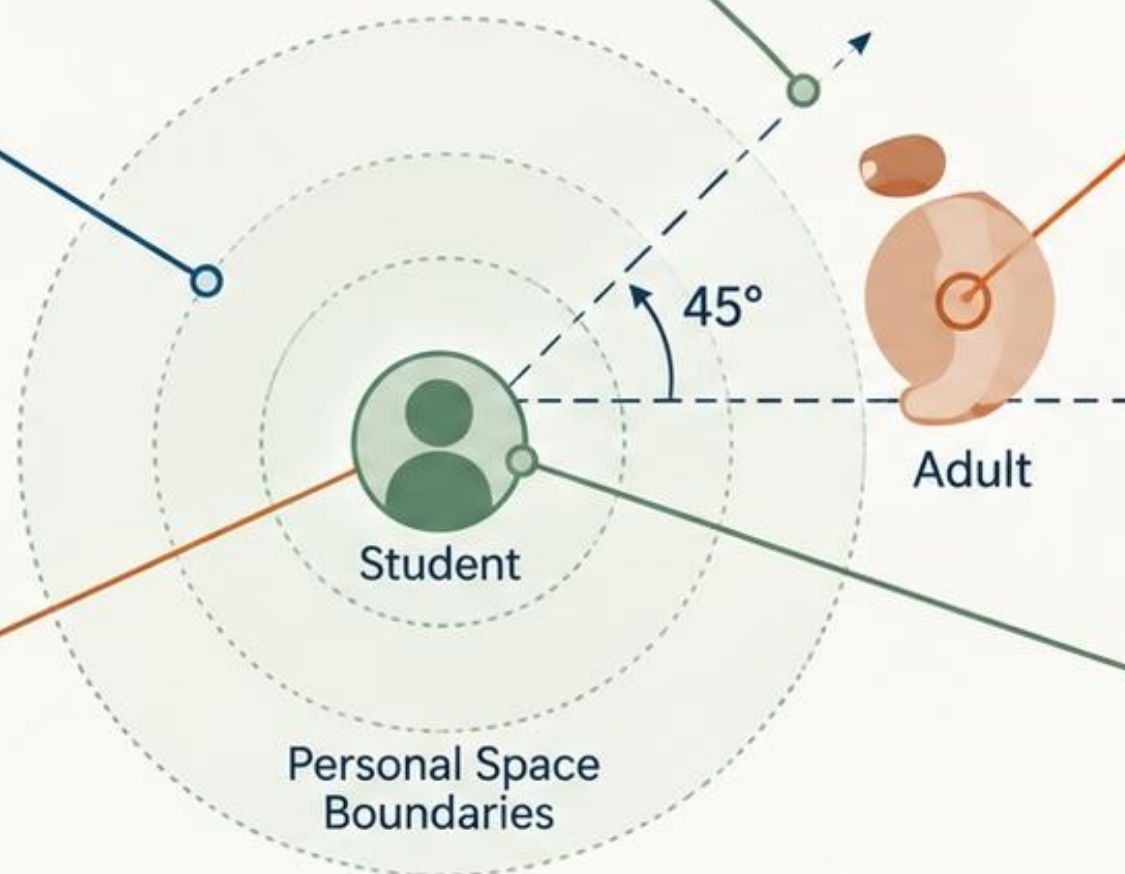
Positioning

Sit side-by-side or stand at a 45-degree angle. Never stand directly face-to-face.



Eye Contact

Avoid intense eye contact (perceived as a threat).



Moving Away from Thermometer to Thermostat

Thermometer

Measures what
is happening right
now.



REACTIONS

Thermostat

Helps us influence
the environment
over time.



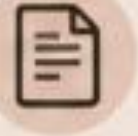
PREVENTION
AND REGULATION

SAME GOAL • A MORE REGULATED ENVIRONMENT

Your Regulation Changes the Interaction

SAME STUDENT. A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE.

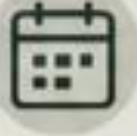
Activated Adult

-  Faster
-  Louder
-  More words
-  More demands



VS

Regulated Adult

-  Slower
-  Quieter
-  Fewer words
-  More predictable



A CALMER ADULT CREATES A SAFER, MORE REGULATED INTERACTION.

Co-Regulation Do's and Don'ts

PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT A CALM, CONNECTED BRAIN

DO THIS



Speak slowly and warmly to guide their pace.



Offer calm presence without pressure to “perform” regulation.



Hold boundaries with compassion.



Validate emotions even when behavior must be redirected.

NOT THAT



Match the student's volume or aggressive tone.



Demand immediate compliance from a dysregulated nervous system.



Shame, isolate, or use retaliatory consequences.



Attempt to teach a lesson or correct behavior while the child is still upset.



The difference between reacting and responding is everything.

Reaction centers control. Response centers connection.

CO-REGULATION ACROSS THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONTINUUM

The amount of adult support changes over time, but the importance of relationship does not.
Development is the gradual internalization of capacities that were first experienced within supportive relationships.

	 EARLY CHILDHOOD Approx. 3–5 years Young children rely on adults to help regulate their bodies, emotions, attention, and behavior.	 ELEMENTARY Approx. 6–11 years Children develop skills with adult guidance, practice, and support. They are learning to regulate.	 ADOLESCENCE Approx. 12–18 years Teens seek independence while still needing supportive relationships to navigate big emotions and challenges.
	 ADULT PROVIDES I regulate for you.	 ADULT SCAFFOLDS We regulate together.	 ADULT PARTNERS You regulate—with my support.
 Brain Development	Rapid brain growth. Regulatory systems are immature. Emotion drives behavior.	Prefrontal cortex is developing. Skills are emerging but inconsistent.	Brain continues maturing into mid-20s. Emotions are intense; impulse control still developing.
 Primary Need	Safety, comfort, connection, and predictable routines.	Belonging, competence, and guidance.	Respect, autonomy, identity, and meaningful connection.
 Adult's Primary Role	Nurturer and protector. Provide external regulation.	Coach and teacher. Scaffold skills and problem-solve together.	Collaborator and mentor. Partner while preserving dignity and autonomy.
 Student's Capacity	Limited ability to regulate emotions, attention, and behavior.	Developing awareness and skills. Needs support to use tools.	Growing self-awareness and self-control. Needs support for complex situations.
 What Co-Regulation Looks Like	• Soothing voice and calm presence • Physical proximity and comfort • Simple language and repetition • Sensory and movement supports • Consistent routines and transitions	• Emotion coaching and naming feelings • Teaching strategies and coping tools • Guided practice and modeling • Visual supports and reminders • Problem-solving conversations	• Active listening and validation • Collaborative problem-solving • Choices and shared decision-making • Respectful boundaries and natural consequences • Restorative conversations
 Language That Helps	"I'm here with you." "You are safe." "Let's take a deep breath together." "You can do hard things."	"What are you feeling?" "What might help right now?" "What could you try next?" "Let's figure this out together."	"What do you think happened?" "How can I support you?" "What are your options?" "I trust you to make good choices."
 Common Pitfalls	• Expecting independence too soon • Using too many words during overwhelm • Inconsistency with routines • Overstimulation and chaotic environments	• Assuming skills are mastered • Over-directing or over-correcting • Focusing on behavior instead of skill-building • Ignoring the need for movement	• Power struggles and ultimatums • Public correction and shaming • Discounting emotions as "drama" • Confusing independence with isolation
 The Ultimate Goal	Build a secure foundation of trust and safety so the child can explore and learn.	Develop self-regulation skills through supported practice.	Foster resilient, self-aware, autonomous young people who can self-regulate.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION



Relationships are the pathway. Skills are the destination.

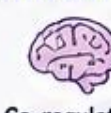
THE UNCHANGING PRINCIPLES



Connection comes before correction.



Safety is the foundation for learning.



Co-regulation today builds self-regulation tomorrow.



Every child needs at least one trusted adult.



Growth happens in relationship, not in isolation.



From Expected Self-Regulation to Providing Co-Regulation

Shifting from **expecting** students to manage themselves to **teaching** them how.

KEY DIFFERENCE	CO-REGULATION (Teaching Self-Regulation)	EXPECTED SELF-REGULATION (Expecting Students to Regulate)
A FOCUS AND PRIMARY GOAL 	 Targets the student's internal physiological state. The goal is to help the student access their prefrontal cortex so they can eventually problem-solve and develop long-term self-regulation skills. It looks "beneath" the behavior to identify what resources or support the student currently needs.	 Focuses exclusively on external behavior and immediate compliance. The primary goal is to stop "bad" behavior through consequences, which often leads to the adult and student returning to the same conflict shortly after because the root cause was not addressed.
B THE ADULT'S INTERNAL STATE: THERMOSTAT VS. THERMOMETER 	 The Thermostat: The adult is aware of their own feelings and sensations and regulates themselves first. Like a thermostat, they hold a steady temperature, staying connected through the conflict to model safety and self-care.	 The Thermometer: The adult has little awareness of their own nervous system and their internal state rises and falls with the student's. This often leads to a "toxic serve and return" where the adult's escalation fuels the student's dysregulation.
C TONE AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION 	 Characterized by a "supportive leader" approach, using a soothing yet assertive tone and open body language. Adults move slowly, crouch to the student's eye level to balance power, and use "reflecting language" to name and validate the student's emotions.	 Employs an escalating or aggressive tone of voice. Non-verbal cues often include notice, pointing fingers, or "towering over" the student, which the student's nervous system perceives as a threat.
D ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE CHILD 	 Recognizes that a dysregulated child is in "survival mode" and is neurologically unable to access rational thought or consequences. It assumes behavior is communication and an opportunity for connection.	 Relies on reasoning and instructions during the crisis, assuming the child can make rational choices while highly stressed. It often views the child's actions as a "character flaw" or a deliberate power struggle that requires a "quick fix".
E RESPONSE TO HOSTILITY AND NEEDS 	 Aims to absorb and "drain off" hostility by providing what the student needs—such as space, rhythmic movement, or a drink of water—before attempting conversation.	 Tends to retaliate to hostility with a "tit-for-tat" mentality. It often ignores the underlying needs, instead shouting consequences in the heat of the moment, such as isolation or loss of privileges.
CO-REGULATION BUILDS CAPACITY. Connection first. Regulation second. Learning lasts.		EXPECTATION WITHOUT SUPPORT CREATES DISTRESS. Control may stop behavior—but it doesn't build skills.

Co-Regulation Is Not the Same as Permissiveness



Supporting children through emotions does not mean allowing all behaviours.
An effective adult posture combines empathy with leadership.

For example:

“I can see that you’re angry
because it’s time to stop playing.
It’s okay to be angry.
I won’t let you hit.”



The adult accepts the emotion
while maintaining the boundary.



Children need both:

- Acceptance of their feelings
- Guidance around their actions



This balance helps children learn that
all emotions are acceptable, even
when some behaviours are not.

