

Co-Regulation in Schools: YOU Make the Difference

Participant Reflection & Activity Booklet

For school support staff in elementary and secondary settings

Presented by Catherine Korah | CEBM

Name: _____ Date: _____

Purpose of this booklet

Use this booklet alongside the presentation to connect ideas to daily practice. The activities invite you to notice, reflect, rehearse, and collaborate—not to find a single perfect response. Adapt examples to the age, needs, dignity, and context of each student.

Our five-part learning journey

1. Understanding Co-Regulation
2. Understanding What Lies Beneath Behaviour
3. The Adult as the Regulation Anchor
4. Co-Regulation in Practice
5. From Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation

Before we begin: My starting point

What situations at school are most challenging for me to respond to calmly? What is one strength I already bring to my relationships with students?

PART 1 | Understanding Co-Regulation

From self-regulation to co-regulation: relationship and nervous-system awareness before compliance.

Reflection: What do I notice first?

Individual reflection • Suggested time: 8 minutes

Think of a recent moment when a student was upset or refusing to participate. Describe your first interpretation and response.

1. What did I see and hear?
2. Did I focus first on behaviour, emotion, safety, or connection?
3. What might change if I asked, “What support does this nervous system need?”

Two lenses, one situation

Pairs • Suggested time: 10 minutes

A student refuses to line up after recess and says, “I’m not going.” Compare two adult responses: a compliance-first response and a regulation-supportive response.

1. What might each adult say or do?

Compliance-first response	Regulation-supportive response

2. Which response preserves safety and expectations while supporting connection?

3. How would you adapt your response for a teenager (for those that work in secondary schools)?

A shared definition

Small-group discussion • Suggested time: 10 minutes

In groups of three, create a one-sentence definition of co-regulation that a new colleague could use.

1. What makes co-regulation relational rather than a quick trick?
2. How is it different from permitting unsafe behaviour?

PART 2 | Understanding What Lies Beneath Behaviour

The brain, nervous system, stress responses, and the interaction of student, context, adult, and outcome.

The behaviour iceberg

Individual exercise • Suggested time: 12 minutes



Choose one behaviour you frequently encounter (withdrawal, argument, leaving, freezing, or escalation). Write the visible behaviour, then possible unseen influences. Treat these as hypotheses, not diagnoses.

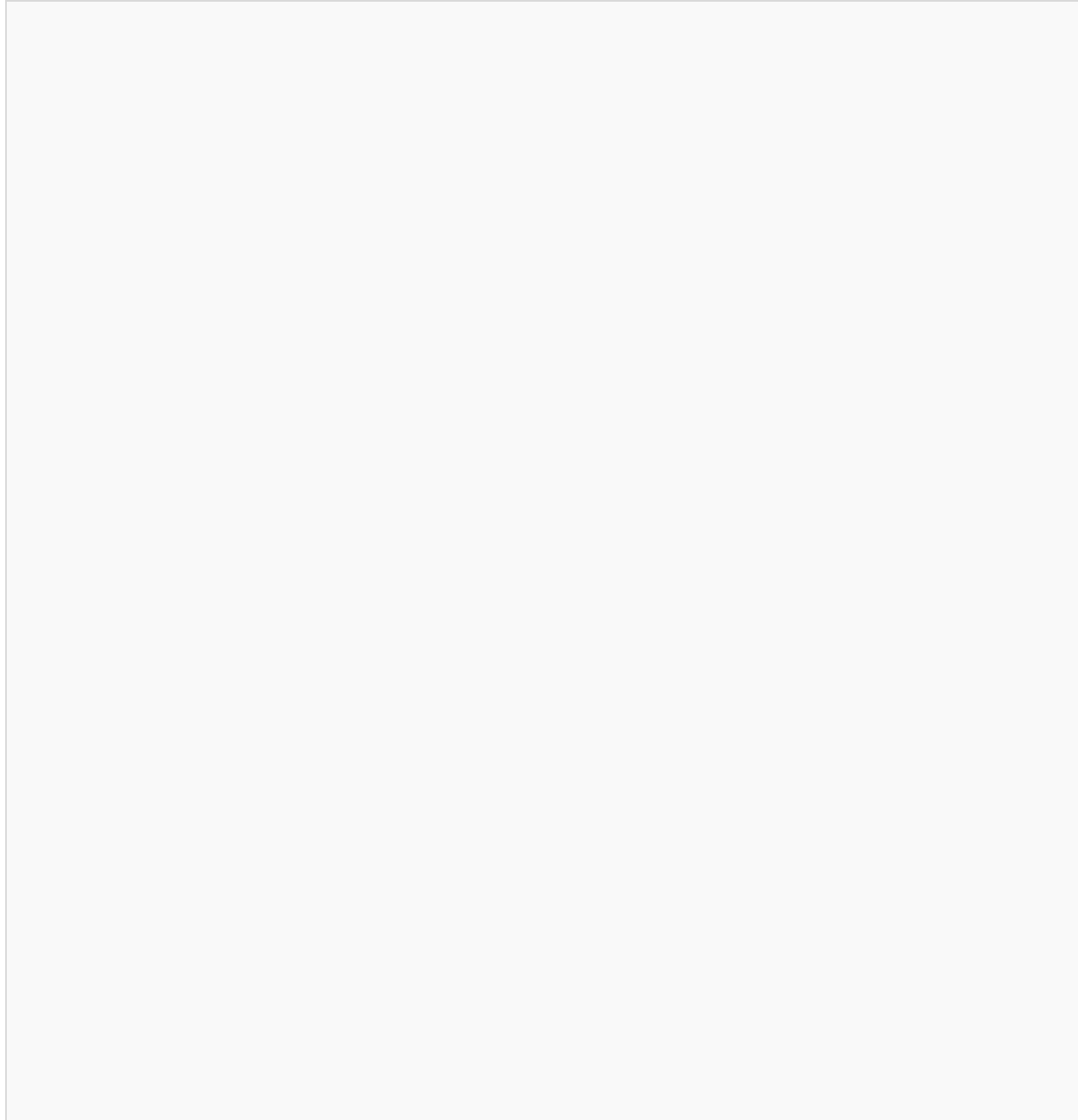
Visible behaviour: What would an observer see?	
Possible stressors, unmet needs, skills still developing, or environmental demands?	
What information would help me avoid jumping to conclusions?	

Observe without interpreting

Pairs • Suggested time: 10 minutes

Rewrite the statement “She is being manipulative and attention-seeking” using only observable information. Then identify a respectful question to investigate.

1. What is the neutral observation?
2. When, where, with whom, and during which demands does it happen?
3. What might help the student feel safer or more capable?

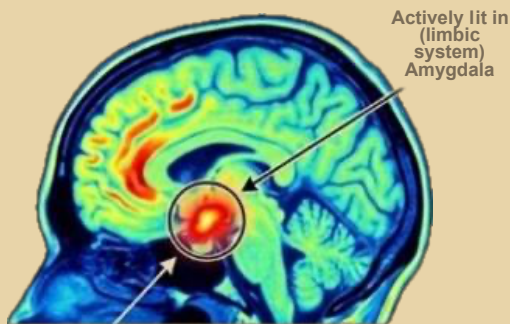


Refer to the ‘**Expectation & Neurodevelopment Mapping**’ document below to help you adjust your expectations depending on the student’s profile and individual differences.

Expectation & Neurodevelopment Mapping

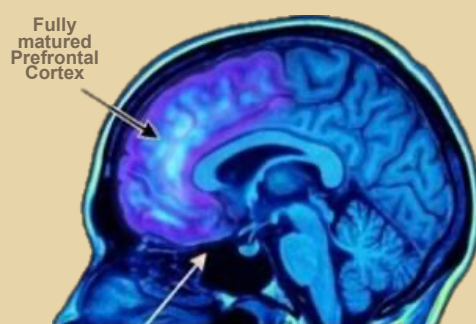
Refer to the brain scans below of the "Youth Brain" (which relies mostly on the amygdala – the emotion center of the brain) next to the "Adult Brain" (which has better access to the prefrontal cortex – the judgment center of the brain). Based on this information, explore whether certain adult expectations in your setting may be demanding an adult-level emotional regulation from brains that have not yet built those neurological pathways.

The Youth Brain



Youth rely on innate reactions driven by the central nervous system. They seek safety cues and respond instinctively.

The Adult Brain



Adults rely on the Prefrontal Cortex for reasoning, executive functions, and weighing long-term consequences. This area is among the last to fully mature (developing into the 20s and 30s).

We cannot expect adult emotional regulation from a brain that physically has not built those pathways yet.

Discussion & Reflection Notes:

Stress response scenario

Small-group case discussion • Suggested time: 12 minutes

State		Student Presentation	Underlying Response
Fight		Aggression, yelling, controlling behavior	Defending against a perceived threat.
Flight		Avoidance, running away, anxious movement	Attempting to escape discomfort.
Freeze		Withdrawal, non-response, shut-down	Nervous system overwhelm.
Fawn		People-pleasing, self-erasure, excessive compliance	Seeking safety through appeasement.

A student becomes silent and motionless when asked to present; another student starts arguing loudly when the room becomes noisy. Consider different stress responses without assuming intent.

1. What signs of activation or shutdown might be present?
2. What immediate adult actions might reduce demand or threat?
3. When would you seek additional team support?

PART 3 | The Adult as the Regulation Anchor

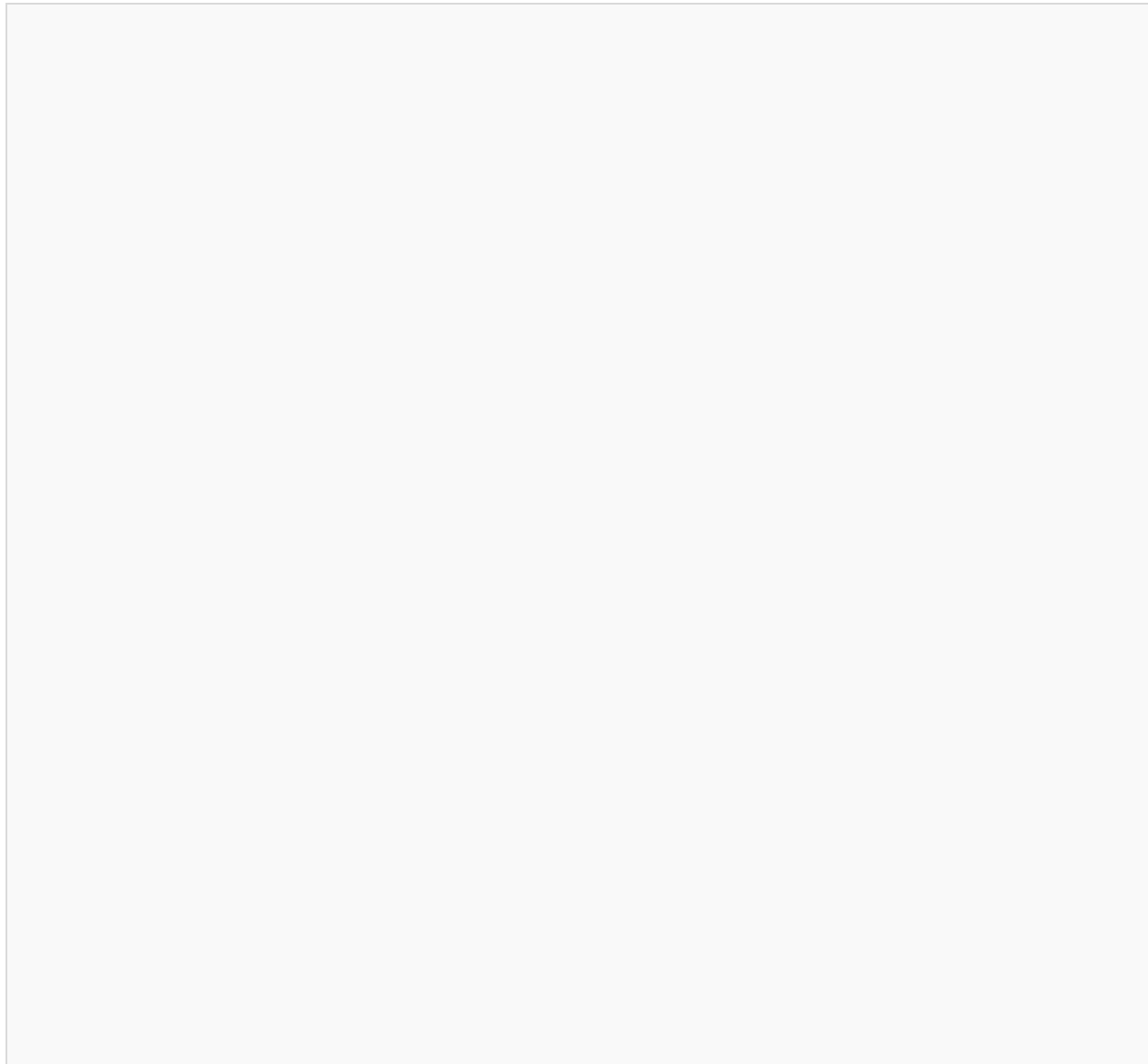
Adult posture, presence, relational safety, and awareness of our own nervous system.

My regulation signals

Individual self-check • Suggested time: 10 minutes

Identify what happens in your body, voice, and thinking when you begin to feel activated.

1. My earliest physical signs are...
2. My common triggers in school are...
3. A small action that helps me return to a steadier state is...



See the **'Educator Trigger Inventory'** and the **'Educator Somatic Toolkit'** below for inspiration.

Educator Trigger Inventory

SELF-REFLECTION & REGULATION TOOL

Objective: Identifying our personal professional triggers allows us to move from reactive stress to intentional co-regulation. Check the items below that consistently push your nervous system toward dysregulation, then complete the brief action strategy below

1. ENVIRONMENTAL & SITUATIONAL TRIGGERS

Sensory Load

- ☐ High vocal volume / piercing screams
- ☐ **Multiple overlapping noises (toys, music, voices)**
- ☐ Visual clutter / unorganized spaces
- ☐ Sustained high-energy chaos in close spaces

Transitions & Logistics

- ☐ Delays or pacing hitches during room changes
- ☐ Cleaning up major/repetitive messes
- ☒ Staff scheduling adjustments / sudden coverage changes
- ☐ Unpredictable routine interruptions

2. BEHAVIORAL & RELATIONAL TRIGGERS

Student Behaviors

- ☐ Active defiance or direct refusal ("No!")
- ☐ Physical dysregulation (hitting, throwing, biting)
- ☐ **Emotional withdrawal / total shut down**
- ☐ Chronic attention-seeking / constant interruption

Adult & Team Dynamics

- ☐ Misaligned co-educator responses or styles
- ☐ High-stress drop-off/pick-up parent interactions
- ☐ Feeling unseen, unvalidated, or unsupported
- ☐ Lack of clear communication within the team

3. PERSONALIZED MICRO-PLAN

My Top 2 Triggers:

Identify the two specific situations above that compromise your capacity to co-regulate most quickly.

Early Warning Signs (My Internal Body Signals):

How do I know I'm hitting my limit? (e.g., shallow breathing, tight shoulders, rushed pacing, tone changes)

Proactive Reset Strategy:

What is one realistic micro-action I can take in the moment to anchor myself? (e.g., 3 deep breaths, changing physical position, a brief grounding phrase, tapping in a teammate)

EDUCATOR SOMATIC TOOLKIT

CORE TOOLS FOR ADULT SELF-REGULATION

The Co-Regulation Premise: A dysregulated educator cannot regulate a dysregulated child. When a classroom trigger occurs, use one of these three core strategies to intentionally stabilize your own nervous system, anchor your presence, and restore operational calm.

1. CORE REGULATION STRATEGIES

1. GROUNDING

5-4-3-2-1 Technique

A direct sensory anchor. Pause and silently identify:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can physically feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Brings your focus away from the chaotic atmosphere and back into the present space.

2. BODY SCAN

Rapid Tension Check

A quick top-to-bottom internal evaluation you can do while standing

- **Jaw:** Unclench teeth & release tongue
- **earoulders:** Drop down away from
- **Hands:** Unclench fists, soften fingers
- **Feet:** Feel weight press into the floor

Releases the physical micro-bracing signals that unconsciously communicate anger or panic to children.

3. BOX BREATHING

Tactical 4x4 Rhythm

A simple, rhythmic cycle to reset your autonomic nervous system:

- **Inhale** through your nose for 4s
- **Hold** your breath at the top for 4s
- **Exhale** through your mouth for 4s
- **Hold** empty at the bottom for 4s

Physically lowers your heart rate and clears adrenaline spikes during overwhelming interactions.

2. PERSONAL APPLICATION WORKSHEET

What type of regulation strategies work best for you?

Reflect on past stressful moments. Do you respond better to sensory grounding, physical tension release (body scan), or deep breath control? Why?

My In-the-Moment Action Prompt:

Write down a 1-sentence micro-cue or specific technique choice you commit to using when you feel your internal tension level rising this term.

■ ■ INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE: SELF-OBSERVATION MATRIX

Imagine watching yourself teach (or reflect on video footage). Record objective observations of what students perceive:

Expression Domain	Your Self-Observation Notes
My Voice (Tone, pitch, speed, volume) <i>[Notes: Pitch spikes, rapid pace, warm resonance...]</i>	
My Pace (Hurried, slow, calm, urgent) <i>[Notes: Rushing, pausing, breathing space, urgent...]</i>	
My Facial Expressions (Neutral, warm, tense, frowning) <i>[Notes: Tight jaw, micro-smiles, flat, reassuring...]</i>	
My Physical Presence (Proximity, distance, stance) <i>[Notes: Towering, leaning, crouching, open chest...]</i>	
CORE REFLECTION: Would I feel emotionally safe learning from me? <i>[Reflect deeply here...]</i>	

Posture over technique

Pairs / role-play • Suggested time: 12 minutes

 The Thermometer Adult (REACTIVE RESPONSE)	 The Thermostat Adult (PREVENTION & CO-REGULATION)
 Awareness Focuses entirely on the child's behavior; ignores own sensations.	 Awareness Willing to regulate own brain before disciplining. Senses own body.
 Tone Loud, aggressive, escalates to stop the behavior.	 Tone Assertive, soothing. Uses prosody as a tool to drain off negativity
 Reaction Retaliates to hostility. Gets caught in a toxic "serve and return" power struggle. Brain state rises and falls with the student.	 Response Absorbs hostility. Models deep breaths or pulse-taking. Holds a steady emotional temperature regardless of the room's chaos.

Practice responding to “Leave me alone!” first with a hurried, reactive tone and then with calm authority, space, and attunement.

1. What changed in tone, pace, distance, facial expression, or words?
2. How can we respect student autonomy while maintaining safety?
3. What phrase feels authentic to me?

Tag out without abandoning

Small-group planning • Suggested time: 10 minutes

Discuss how colleagues can support each other when an adult is becoming dysregulated.

1. What early signals tell me I should ask for help?
2. What brief handoff language protects the student's dignity?
3. How can we reconnect after a colleague steps in?

PART 4 | Co-Regulation in Practice

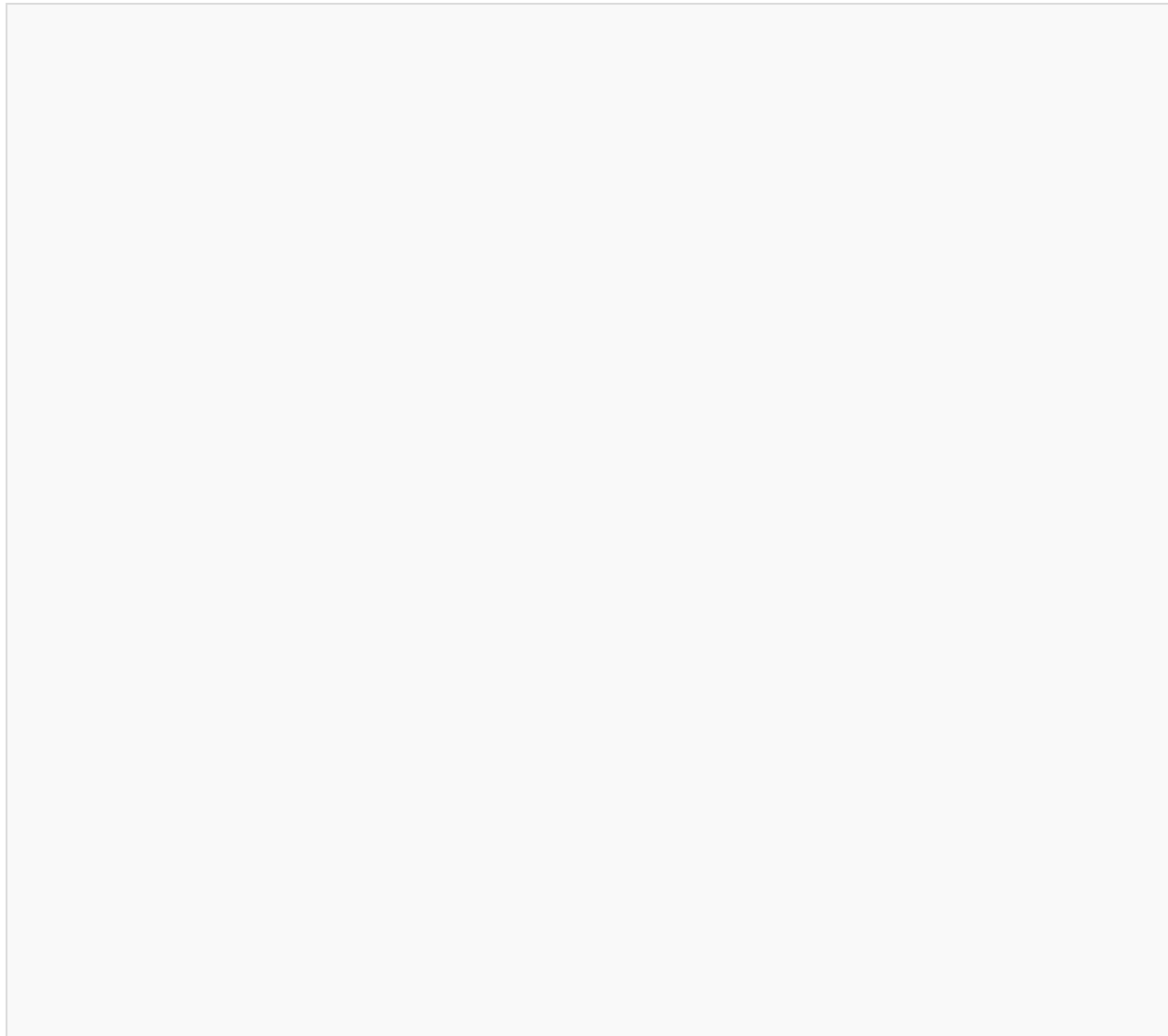
Prevention, environments, routines, supportive language, de-escalation, recovery, and re-entry.

Map the school day

Individual exercise • Suggested time: 12 minutes

Identify three predictable moments when students may need additional regulation support (e.g., arrival, transitions, unstructured times, group work, assessment, re-entry).

1. Where is regulation most fragile?
2. What can we change in predictability, environment, choice, or adult presence before escalation?
3. What is one feasible action I can try tomorrow?



See the '**Student Experience Map**' (for elementary or for secondary) below to help you visualize how the day can unfold for the student.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE MAP

Walking Through a School Day in Their Shoes

DIRECTIONS:

-  What is happening? What are the demands?
-  Where might this student struggle?
-  How might they feel?
-  What behaviour might adults see?

Imagine a day in the life of a vulnerable student.

What do they experience, feel, and need throughout the day?



REFLECTION

Which part of the day would likely be the MOST difficult for this student? Why?

Which transitions may be particularly challenging? Why?

What new understanding did you gain about this student's behaviour after mapping their day?

One change I could make as an educator to better support a student like this:

STUDENT EXPERIENCE MAP

A Day in Their Shoes – Secondary School

DIRECTIONS:



- What is happening? What are the demands?
- Where might this student struggle?
- How might they feel?
- What behaviour might adults see?

Imagine a day in the life of a student at the secondary level. What do they experience, feel, and need throughout the day?



1 **ARRIVAL**
(7:30–8:00 AM)



2 **HOMEROOM**
(8:00–8:10 AM)



3 **PERIOD 1**
(8:10–9:20 AM)



4 **BREAK**
(9:20–9:35 AM)



5 **PERIOD 2**
(9:35–10:45 AM)



6 **LUNCH**
(10:45 AM–12:00 PM)



7 **PERIOD 3**
(12:00–1:10 PM)



8 **PERIOD 4**
(1:10–2:20 PM)



9 **AFTER SCHOOL**
(2:20 PM+)



REFLECTION

What might be helpful to this student at different points in the day?



What barriers might they be facing?

What is one change I could make as an educator to better support this student?

Language that supports regulation

Pairs • Suggested time: 12 minutes

Rewrite each statement into language that is brief, calm, respectful, and maintains an appropriate boundary:

“Calm down right now”; “Why are you doing this?”; “You know better.”

1. Which words communicate safety and choice?
2. How would your language differ for an elementary student versus a secondary student?
3. How can you reduce language when the student is highly activated?

Respond, recover, re-enter

Small-group scenario • Suggested time: 15 minutes

During lunch, two students argue; one pushes a chair, leaves the area, and later wants to return to class. Design a response across the sequence safety → regulation → connection → reflection → accountability → learning.

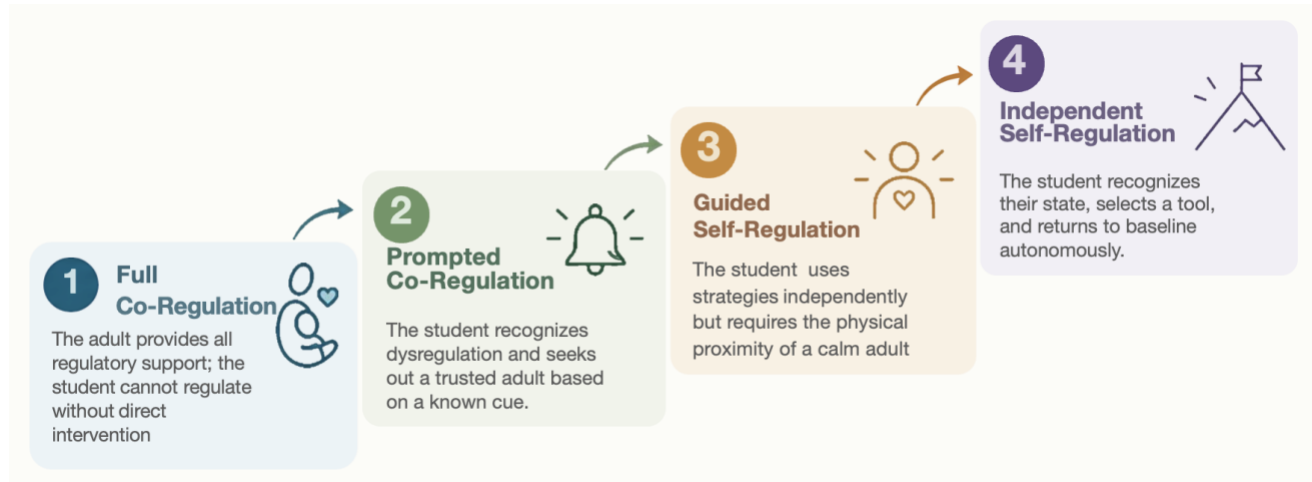
1. What must happen immediately for safety?
2. What should wait until the student is regulated?
3. What does supported re-entry look like without shame or exclusion?

PART 5 | From Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation

Repeated supported experiences, gradual internalization, repair, resilience, and adult sustainability.

Progressive student support

Individual reflection • Suggested time: 10 minutes



Think of a student who frequently relies on adult help. Map how support could shift gradually from adult-led to shared to student-led.

1. What does the adult currently provide?
2. What skill or cue can we model and practise together?
3. What would show the student is ready for slightly more independence?

A large, empty rectangular box for mapping support shifts.

Repair after rupture

Pairs / role-play • Suggested time: 12 minutes

Practise a brief repair conversation after both adult and student have returned to a regulated state. Focus on reconnection before problem-solving.

1. How will you communicate that the relationship is intact?
2. What curious, non-blaming question could open reflection?
3. How can accountability and a realistic plan for next time be included?

Sustainable co-regulation

Small-group discussion • Suggested time: 10 minutes

Discuss the conditions adults need in order to remain available, steady, and effective over time.

1. What routines and team practices protect adult well-being?
2. Where can we share responsibility instead of relying on one “safe adult”?
3. What change is within our influence as a team?

Putting Learning Into Action

Choose one small, observable shift in your everyday practice. Start with a specific setting rather than a broad promise.

One practice I want to continue:

One practice I want to change:

One phrase or co-regulation response I will rehearse:

The situation or time of day where I will try it:

How I will know whether it is helping:

A colleague who can support or reflect with me:

Final reflection

How has my understanding of “challenging behaviour” changed? What does “YOU make the difference” mean in my role?