



Co-Regulation for PDA Families

Principles, techniques, and quick-reference guide

Co-regulation is the process through which a calm, regulated adult helps a dysregulated child return to a manageable emotional state. For PDA children — whose nervous systems are chronically attuned to threat — co-regulation is not a technique. It is the foundation of the entire approach.

What Is Co-Regulation?

Humans are social mammals. Our nervous systems are designed to take cues from the people around us. When a parent or teacher stays calm in the face of a child's dysregulation, the child's nervous system begins to mirror that calm. This is co-regulation — and it works at a neurological level, not just a behavioural one.

The key principle You cannot regulate a child's nervous system by telling them to calm down. You can only do it by being calm yourself. Your regulated nervous system is the intervention.

Why Co-Regulation Is Essential in PDA

- PDA children's nervous systems are in a near-constant state of threat detection
- Self-regulation skills develop much later — and require a co-regulation scaffold to develop at all
- Instructions, reasoning, and consequences increase threat — they don't reduce it
- A consistent, calm adult presence builds the neurological safety that makes regulation possible

Core Co-Regulation Techniques

Physiological Regulation — Regulate Yourself First

Before you respond, check in with your own body

- Slow your breathing — exhale longer than you inhale (4 in, 6 out)
- Drop your shoulders and unclench your jaw
- Lower your voice pitch deliberately — not volume, pitch
- Slow your physical movements — walk slower, move more gently

Proximity and Presence

- Stay near the child — proximity without demands communicates safety
- Sit at their level rather than standing over them
- Face slightly away rather than directly toward them if distress is high
- Stay quiet — your presence is enough



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Validation Without Demands

- "I can see this is really hard."
- "That makes sense — that would feel overwhelming."
- "You don't need to do anything right now."
- "I'm not going anywhere."

Building Your Co-Regulation Capacity

Co-regulation requires you to manage your own anxiety while the child is in crisis. This is genuinely hard — especially when you're exhausted, scared, or frustrated. Investing in your own regulation capacity is not a luxury. It is a clinical necessity.

Supports that build your regulation capacity

- Regular sleep and physical activity — non-negotiable for nervous system health
- Your own therapy or counselling — particularly somatic/body-based approaches
- Peer support with other PDA families — they understand in ways others cannot
- Planned respite — short-term accommodation through NDIS or informal arrangements

Remember You do not need to be perfectly calm to co-regulate your child. You need to be moving in the direction of calm. Even a 30% reduction in your own arousal level helps. You are human. That is enough.