

Teaching Self-Regulation Skills through Therapeutic Parenting

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training. This lesson is: Teaching Self-Regulation Skills through Therapeutic Parenting.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to identify and describe specific therapeutic strategies to assist parents to:

- Build awareness of and improve their own regulation skills
- Provide a healthy balance of nurture and structure in parent-child interaction, and
- Support the development of the youth's capacity for self-regulation and healthy coping

2. The Importance of Self-Regulation

2.1 The Importance of Self-Regulation

As we have been discussing throughout this curriculum, there will be a subset of children and youth who lack self-regulation and will present with chronic, adverse behaviors that will warrant a very focused intervention, integrating parenting strategies to manage the behaviors.

Let's briefly discuss the importance of self-regulation in children.

2.2 Self-Regulation and the Brain

Self-regulation is defined as, *"The capacity to effectively manage experience on many levels: cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioral."*

As we have emphasized throughout this course, the development of self-regulation skills depends on healthy attachment and brain development. We often assume that it's too late for teenagers to enhance their brain functioning, but in fact, it is an ideal time.

Listen to Drs. Cross and Purvis explain this opportunity.

[Video Transcript]

DR. CROSS: We have thought for a long time that by the time a human-being reaches 15, 16, 17, 18, that their brain is pretty much formed. But we now know that some of the critical parts of the brain are still in the process of maturing.

DR. PURVIS: Making this an absolute optimal time to work with young people. [Teenagers playing a game.]

GIRL: I will fall.

DR. CROSS: As their coach, not their warden.

COACH: If you ask with respect, you don't have to wear the flippers.

GIRL: Can I not wear the flippers, please.

COACH: Sure. Come on. Here we go.

DR. CROSS: Healing a traumatized brain can only take place in the context of a nurturing and trusting relationship.

GIRL: I feel like I'm going to fall.

COACH: I got you.

DR. PURVIS: What we now know about child development from recent advances in neuroscience and from recent advances in understanding the impact of trauma is that rules base will never bring about deep healing. We now know that the brain is shaped through relationships, and it can only be mended through relationships.

[End of Video]

2.3 Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress

Self-regulation promotes positive mental and physical health, the capacity for learning, healthy relationships, problem-solving, and overall adjustment throughout life.

The Administration for Children and Families funded a series of reports on self-regulation in children and teens coming from high-risk situations. One of these, *"Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress"* is included in the Resources section.

2.4 Parent Resistance Reflection

Let's shift our attention to how you can help parents support their children's development of self-regulation.

Therapeutic parenting programs offer many correcting principles for parents to respond to negative behaviors and shape the youth's abilities to self-regulate and develop prosocial behaviors.

Therapists can teach parents that improving self-regulation requires:

- Setting firm, realistic limits on behavior
- Helping children or teens learn to understand, modulate, and express their own emotions
- Responding sensitively when they are reactive and dysregulated, and
- Helping children and teens learn and practice appropriate self-regulation skills

In the next section, we will discuss important aspects of each of these goals.

2.5 What If Parents Are Resistant to Learning New Parenting Techniques?

If a parent is resistant to the idea that their old repertoire of parenting skills may not be enough to help their child, what might you say to encourage the parent to engage in and integrate therapeutic parenting techniques into their parenting toolbox?

2.6 Parent Resistance Response

You might have thought of the following:

- *"I know that you have already raised 3 children. If Max had not had any disruptions in his life, this kind of parenting would work just fine. But because he has had experiences that make him question safety and security, you need to learn a therapeutic approach to parenting."*
- *"Learning these skills will help you build a more trusting relationship with Max, who, in turn, will feel safer with you."*
- *"What we know is that when parents use these skills with their children, family stability and well-being usually increase."*

This is a good opportunity for psychoeducation focusing on brain neurobiology, the impact of trauma on the brain, and understanding the fight, flight, or freeze response so common in children with trauma histories.

As the therapist, you may need to model the skills and practice them with parents. Also, hearing from other parents who are using these new skills is another incentive to motivate parents to learn them.

3. Goals for Improving Self-Regulation

3.1 Goals for Improving Self-Regulation

Let's turn now to a discussion of the goals for improving self-regulation.

3.2 Goal: Setting Firm, Realistic Limits on Youth Behavior

Remember the importance of balancing nurture and structure? This means that parents need to remain nurturing and meet all their child or teen's reasonable needs and requests. The first goal in improving self-regulation is setting firm, realistic limits on youth behavior. Click each number to learn more.

1. Parents say "Yes" when they can; occasionally allow a compromise; and say "No" when necessary. At the same time, parents need to maintain self-control by remaining calm and conveying simple and consistent rules to their child or teen.
2. Consistency is important in enforcing limits, but being consistent does not mean rigidity. For example, if the rule is to do homework right after dinner, there may be a time to be flexible on this, such as special occasions, when neighborhood kids are getting together, or when engaging in a family activity.
3. Another important component to teaching limits is for parents to praise desirable behaviors rather than focusing on disciplining the negative behaviors. You may recall the ratio of 5 positive interactions for every negative interaction discussed earlier. This can be a significant shift for some parents.
4. Whenever possible, it is helpful for parents to phrase instructions in the positive – so that they are replacing what not to do with what to do. At times, parents will have to issue strong commands, such as "It is not okay to hurt people." Such phrases can be followed by a positive instruction like "Be gentle." Often commands can be phrased in a more positive and proactive way. For example, instead of saying "Don't make such a mess" a parent can say, "Please put your dirty clothes in the hamper!"

3.3 Scripting Desired Behaviors

One technique for teaching pro-social behavior, used in TBRI and No Drama Discipline, is called "scripting" new behaviors.

This involves using a simple phrase to describe each behavior and using the script to demonstrate the behavior, often with puppets for younger children or roleplay for older youth and teens.

You can have the youth practice it and praise them when they have successfully demonstrated the behaviors. A youth who has learned and practiced these scripts can key in on this short phrase and begin to self-regulate.

This can replace a lot of critical responses from parents and keep the interaction focused on behavior, rather than the youth.

Image 723129694, Russia, Krasnodar (2017) used courtesy of Shutterstock

3.4 Demonstrating the Use of Scripting

Let's watch this example of teaching respect from a teen TBRI group.

[Video Transcript]

DR. PURVIS: You want to raise a question, yes?

THOMAS: Yes. What do you consider bad words?

DR. PURVIS: Bad words would be, "You're stupid. I hate you. That's dumb. That sucks." Words that are not descriptive are not good words. That sucks doesn't tell the adult what you need. Good words are feeling, honest words that are said with respect. Yes.

TIARA: Like whenever you ask or command people to do something for you, "Do this for me!" And in a good way, "Can you do this for me?"

DR. PURVIS: Good words. Good words.

MODERATOR: Tiara, who's participating more, not only receives praise from Dr. Purvis, she gets a knuckle bump from Moe. Instead of forcing participation we offer choices to encourage it.

[Adults and children acting out scenarios.]

DR. PURVIS: We have this notion that we have to make the rules, and they have to stick with our rules, and yet what we demonstrated was, in everything that we did, "You can participate or not participate," and usually they would choose to participate.

DR. PURVIS: So somebody want to demonstrate what you learned, what you practiced just now?

MODERATOR: Moe and his buddy Noel are quick to volunteer.

MOE: Noel, it's time to get ready for bed.

NOEL: Oh, that's stupid. I don't feel like going to sleep.

MOE: Hang on a minute. I want us to try that again and I'm going to go after [CROSSTALK]. All right? Let's try that again. [Knocking] Noel, it's time to go to bed.

NOEL: Can I have a compromise, please, like 10 minutes?

MOE: What do you want to do?

NOEL: Ten minutes and then I'll go to sleep.

MOE: Okay, you'll have everything done in 10 minutes, be ready, lights out?

NOEL: Yes.

MOE: Okay, you got a deal. [Applause]

DR. PURVIS: Then everybody applauds, "Oh, that's good. No respect." And then we practice it the right way and then everybody applauds, "Great. Showing respect." So these young people get to experience what it feels like when they're doing no respect and then experience success at showing respect.

[End of Video]

3.5 Goal: Teaching Youth How to Understand and Respond to Their Feelings

The second goal in improving self-regulation is teaching youth how to understand and respond to their feelings.

According to the developers of ARC, the work with youth around affect identification is building awareness of the youth's internal experience - and helping them learn how to discriminate and name emotional states and understand where these feelings come from. This involves the following steps:

- Supporting youth to build a vocabulary for emotions in self and others using feeling charts or games.
- Helping youth to build connections among identified emotion and internal and external experiences, including body sensations, thoughts, and behaviors.
- Teaching parents to use reflective listening skills so they can support emerging affect identification in their children.

3.6 Modulating Emotions

When a youth is easily frustrated and their behaviors quickly escalate, it is natural for a parent to also feel frustrated and to fall back on coercive disciplinary techniques, such as angry threats and punishment.

Parents need to modulate their own emotions and learn strategies that provide nurturing, respectful support to the child or teen rather than shaming or demeaning them. As you are doing this work, it's important to help parents build an awareness of their own reactions to fear and stress and be in touch with their own physiological and emotional responses.

There are many techniques for this that therapists can teach parents, such as body relaxation, deep breathing, guided imagery, listening to music, or doing something with their hands like clay work.

Youth need help to become aware of differences in arousal states and identify changes in levels of emotion, such as agitation or anger. As a therapist, your work will include providing and practicing a repertoire of strategies to help manage and regulate their own physiological and emotional responses.

3.7 Goal: Responding Sensitively When Youth are Reactive and Dysregulated

The third goal in improving self-regulation is responding sensitively when youth are reactive and dysregulated.

While there are many therapeutic parenting models, we will discuss some basic principles for correcting behavior common to TBRI and No Drama Discipline. Therapists can help parents use the following strategies with their kids. Click on each post-it note to learn more.

1. **Timing:** You can guide parents to respond to misbehavior right after it occurs. If the youth is very dysregulated and not ready to have a conversation, they may have a period to calm down before discussing the behavior. This same approach works for parents who may themselves be dysregulated.
2. **Be succinct:** Encourage parents to use as few words as possible to get the point across. Remember that children and teens usually tune out after the first sentence of a lecture.
3. **Connect:** Help parents to embrace and reflect the youth's emotions and convey appropriate behavior. For example, *"It's hard when friends tease you. It's important to be respectful even when you are upset."*
4. **Match response:** It is important to help parents understand that they need to match their response to the level of the youth's misbehavior. A mild challenge may be handled with a brief, humorous engagement; a moderate challenge may require giving the youth a chance to self-correct with a light, *"Whoa, let's do that again!"* or coaching them in the appropriate behavior, whereas a serious or dangerous situation requires a more immediate and firm corrective interaction.
5. **Initiate dialogue:** As a therapist, you can coach parents to elicit the youth's feelings and thoughts about what happened and really listen to them. Have them consider together what they need to do differently. If the youth has harmed someone, they can consider what to do to make things right, including a do-over in which the youth practices getting it right.

3.8 Goal: Practicing Self-Regulation Skills

The fourth and final goal in improving self-regulation is practicing self-regulation skills.

When holding a child accountable for unacceptable behaviors, parents need to teach them acceptable responses.

Helping the child or teen learn and practice desired responses and consider the consequences of their behaviors are all part of disciplinary teaching.

3.9 Cooling Down

When a youth's emotions are dysregulated, they are not able to think through and learn from the situation. In this case, a cooling down period is needed to help the youth self-regulate.

Many therapeutic parenting experts advise the use of a "time-in" rather than a "time-out" where the child is kept close to the parent and is asked to think about their behavior and consider how they could have dealt with the situation more positively. This addresses misbehavior while the parent is letting their child know that they are still connected to them.

For teens, this may come in the form of taking a step back to calm down and think about their situation. You can help parents message that they are still connected to the teen and value their feelings and will process the situation when the teen has calmed down.

3.10 Use a "Time-In" Rather Than a "Time-Out"

The use of time-out may have a detrimental impact on children and youth who have attachment challenges or trauma experiences. Click on either side to learn more about this.

Time-out: Think about how time-out feels to someone with a trauma history. What messages might time-out be sending?

- It feels rejecting
- It reinforces the self-concept that, "I'm bad"
- It reinforces a sense of abandonment

Time-in: Now, think about how time-in would feel to the same person.

- "I'm not alone."
- "You want me with you."
- "I'm not a bad person."

The difference in these messages to the youth who has experienced abandonment or rejection and lacks trust is powerful.

When the youth is calm and ready to talk, therapists can teach parents to engage them in recognizing what they did wrong and how they can act more appropriately.

3.11 Logical Consequences

Dr. Vera Fahlberg wrote a classic text for promoting the well-being and mental health of children in foster care and adoption. She advocated the expansion of logical consequences, in which the parent dispenses the consequence after misbehavior, to a more supportive type of control that maintains connection. Click on each post-it note on the left to learn more.

Sharing Power: The parent shares power with the youth through offering choices that will provide acceptable solutions. TBRI describes this as “going for a sideswipe, not a head-on collision.”

Two Choices: By offering children or teens two choices, the parent is changing the focus from what they cannot do to what they can do. This makes them more responsible for their behavior, reduces power struggles, and builds decision making and internal control. For example, a parent could say: *“You have two choices; you can play with the basketball outside, or you can give me the ball and find something else to do inside.”* If the youth tries to avoid choosing, the parent can repeat the choices without argument or ask them to repeat their choices. This makes the expectations very clear and predictable.

3.12 Collaborative Problem Solving/ Collaborative and Proactive Solutions

Another practice approach that shares power with the youth is Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS), discussed in earlier modules. The philosophy underlying CPS is that “kids do well if they can.”

CPS has developed a “Thinking Skills Inventory” to assist in assessing youth skills in five core domains. More information can be found in the Resources tab.

This approach encourages identifying predictable times when behaviors are challenging, talking about those times when they are not happening, and planning with the youth to manage them. Simply put, their approach relies on three steps: Click on each circle to hear the steps.

Step 1: Identify and understand the concern about the problem to be solved and reassure the youth that the problem will be resolved collaboratively.

Step 2: Identify and share the adults’ concerns about the same issue.

Step 3: The youth and adult work to brainstorm solutions together to assess potential solutions and choose one that is both realistic and mutually satisfactory. After the event, the youth and the parent check in, talk about how it went, talk about how it felt different, and modify the plan as needed.

3.13 Other Strategies for Sharing Power

Other strategies you can teach parents for sharing power include the following:

- **Compromise:** The parent may offer a compromise or allow the youth to ask for one. For example, the parent may tell the child it’s time to go to bed, and the child is playing a board game with their sibling and asks to be allowed to finish it. The parent might offer a compromise in which they state, *“You can play two more rounds, but then you need to go to bed right after that.”*
- **Reframe a No into a Conditional Yes:** Parents need to teach children to accept no when it is necessary, but at times they can offer a conditional yes. For example, a child may ask for more time to play with her friend when it’s time to leave. The parent could say, *“I know you want to play with Deirdre longer. We have to leave now to pick up your brother, but we could ask her if she could come over on the weekend.”*

3.14 Improvement

As children and youth learn new skills, their brain development and body chemistry improve, and they develop a greater capacity for self-regulation.

In addition to changing behavior, therapeutic parenting builds competency in all areas.

As a therapist, you can help parents understand that permanent behavioral change will take hundreds of repetitions over many months. This process is slow, but persisting can make a difference.

It will most likely come in fits and starts, and celebrating positive gains during the process is important.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, we provided some therapeutic parenting strategies for therapists to use when working with adoptive or guardianship families to respond appropriately to negative behavior and support the youth's development of self-regulation.

4.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

4.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson what are the key takeaways and how will you apply these in your practice?

4.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

4.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have now completed Teaching Self-Regulation Skills through Therapeutic Parenting.

In the next lesson, we will focus on managing behaviors that contribute to adoption instability.