



## Learning Services

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### Immediate Strategies for Effective Co-Regulation

- **Get on their level.** When a child feels overwhelmed, it's tough to help them calm down when you're towering over them. If you can, get close to eye level and look them in the eyes. Research shows that eye contact fosters trust and connectedness. Eye contact can help kids feel safe. But it's also important to note that some kids with autism can be hypersensitive to direct eye contact. So, it's best to take your cues from the individual child.
- **Name their emotion.** For example: "It looks like you're really upset, right now." Labeling a child's emotion lets kids know explicitly that you can see what they might be feeling. You're validating the emotion here, not the behavior — it's okay to feel bad. Labeling also teaches them to notice and name their own emotions, which for very young kids is not intuitive.
- **Change your tone.** Be sure to keep your tone calm, and don't raise your voice. Trying your best to sound relaxed can be a powerful disruptor when a child is upset because we tend to imitate the behaviors we see in others. This "mirroring" happens subconsciously, as a product of mirror neurons in the brain. And there is [growing evidence](#) that suggests mirror neurons play an important role in how we learn and express empathy.
- **Give them a hug or a squeeze.** When children are extremely dysregulated, they will most likely not tolerate touch – read their cues. But if a child is calm enough (able to tolerate your touch) and consenting to touch, it is a potent tool in the co-regulation toolkit. Touching another person can boost their oxytocin levels. Oxytocin, sometimes called the "love hormone," makes us feel good. It also perpetuates its own release, meaning that a hug or a hand squeeze can have a positive effect that outlasts the action itself.
- **Guide them in a calming exercise.** If there is a [calming](#) or breathing exercise that the child is familiar with — maybe you learned it together, maybe they learned it in school — suggest you do it together. Don't be deterred if they say no. Say you'd like to do the exercise because it helps you calm down (it's helpful, especially with very young kids, to reinforce what these exercises are actually for) and start doing it yourself. They may just watch you; they may join in. In the end, either outcome is valuable.