Building Staff Co-Regulation to Support Healthy Relationships **in Youth**

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Who is this guide for?

Project directors and practitioners providing relationship education for youth and young adults

Goals

- Help programs integrate the science of self-regulation development into existing services through co-regulation—the interactive process of adult support for youth self-regulation

- Inspire programs to embed a co-regulation framework and strategies into their service delivery approach

- Share practical takeaways and lessons learned from one co-regulation project to help guide the integration of co-regulation into other programs

Overview

Self-regulation, the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed behavior, is fundamental to healthy relationships and lifelong well-being. We learn to self-regulate through interactions with the people and places around us. Self-regulation is of great interest to those who study adolescence because it is linked to academic achievement, social competence, positive peer relationships, and overall well-being. Emerging research on the brain points to adolescence as a critical period for self-regulation development and a salient time for intervention. Targeted support from adults who care for and work with youth can enhance self-regulation development.

As part of a nationwide initiative to promote healthy relationships in adult individuals, couples, and youth, the federal Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) funds comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services.

Youth programs can improve young people's attitudes, knowledge, and expectations of romantic relationships by helping them develop key skills to form healthy relationships (and avoid unhealthy ones). The Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM) project was funded through a collaboration between OFA and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) with the aim of further advancing relationship health and self-sufficiency by applying a developmental framework to human services. The SARHM team, including researchers from Public Strategies and Mathematica advised by self-regulation and youth experts, collaborated with OFA-funded, youth-serving grantees to develop and pilot test evidence-informed strategies to boost youth self-regulation. The strategies were designed to integrate with pre-existing programs regardless of the specific

curricula used and without altering program content. The goal of the strategies was to build the capacity of youth program facilitators to integrate self-regulation support into the delivery of relationship education curricula.

This guide begins by explaining how self-regulation underlies success in many areas of life and why adolescence is a crucial time for caring adults—like HMRE practitioners—to offer self-regulation support. We introduce the concept of **co-regulation**, a process through which adults create safe spaces and nurturing relationships as the context for coaching the use of self-regulation skills that promote youths' healthy development. The guide explains how integrating co-regulation approaches into youth service delivery may improve program implementation and youth outcomes. At the end of the document, you will find information from the SARHM project on specific strategies and resources you can use to improve co-regulation in your program.

Highlights from this guide

Self-regulation is fundamental to healthy relationships and is therefore a key target for youth-focused relationship education.

Youth experience critical brain development that is enhanced by adult co-regulation support. Co-regulation is the supportive process between caring adults and youth that fosters self-regulation. Co-regulation includes developing and maintaining warm relationships, collaborating with youth to co-create supportive environments, and coaching and modeling the use of skills that promote self-regulation.

Integrating a co-regulation framework **(see Figure 2)** and teaching program staff to provide co-regulation support may improve youth and program outcomes. For example, when facilitators welcome and check in with each individual youth (developing warm relationships) or allow youth to establish and practice group values (co-creating a supportive environment), they may enhance youth engagement and learning. See **Figure 3** for more strategies, and the **Steps for Applying the Co-Regulation Model** resource at the end of this guide.

The SARHM project provides examples of how programs can adopt a co-regulation framework. Programs can follow the SARHM approach if they (1) review OPRE's self-regulation resources, (2) examine current practices for opportunities to enhance relationships, environments, and skills-coaching, and (3) collaborate with frontline staff to test and refine co-regulation strategies for use in workshops and the workplace.

What is self-regulation and why is it an important focus for HMRE programs?

Behavior

Cognition **Emotion**
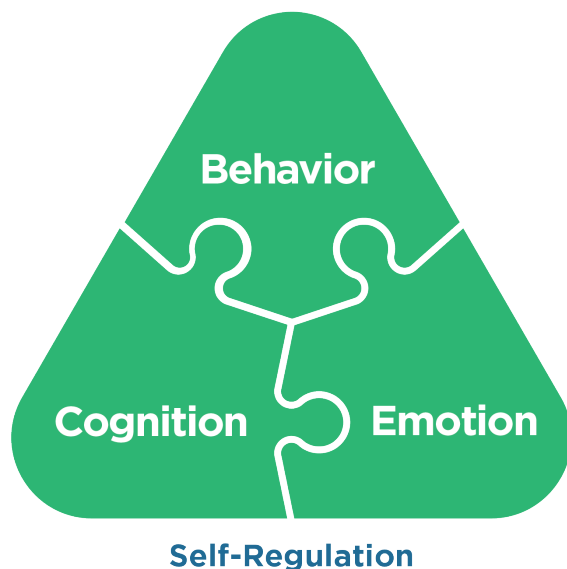
Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the act of managing thoughts, feelings, and behavior in the moment and over time in order to achieve our goals. It includes skills like impulse control, managing stress and anger, decision-making, and problem-solving. When we self-regulate, we act in our long-term best interest, return to a calm state when experiencing intense feelings, and stay true to our deepest values. Self-regulation is foundational to success in many areas, including relationships, employment, physical and emotional health, and community well-being. We learn to self-regulate through experiences in supportive environments and relationships. **Figure 1** highlights skills that youth can develop when they receive key types of support from adults.

FIGURE 1

SELF-REGULATION SKILLS THAT DEVELOP WITH ADULT CO-REGULATION SUPPORT

01 Cognitive skills

including flexibility, perspective-taking, effective in-the-moment and long-term decision-making, organization, time management, task completion, longer-term goal-setting, and self-monitoring to achieve goals

02 Emotional skills

including noticing and managing strong or unpleasant feelings, empathy, and compassion for self and others

03 Behavioral skills

including delaying gratification, persistence, self-calming, and controlling impulses in order to achieve goals

Although the term makes it sound internal to an individual, self-regulation develops through interactions with caring adults, like parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors.

The supportive process between adults and youth that fosters self-regulation development is called co-regulation.

Adapted from Murray et al., 2016.

Why is it important for HMRE staff to understand self-regulation and co-regulation?

HMRE practitioners may be able to boost youth engagement, learning, and program delivery through intentional support of youths' self-regulation. The conditions that promote self-regulation development—such as forming positive relationships with staff and other program participants—can enhance engagement by increasing youths' motivation and focus. Such conditions are linked to better uptake of content, which in turn supports the development of healthy relationships.

To foster co-regulation in HMRE programs, supervisors can examine the relationships between facilitators and participants, the program environment, and the presence of distinct components of self-regulation skills coaching in their service delivery.

With these qualities in mind, staff can be trained to:

o   Relate warmly and nonjudgmentally toward participants (and each other) and respond to their needs with encouragement;

o   Create nurturing environments that promote dignity and engender a sense of safety and belonging;

o   Coach participants to use self-regulation skills. **Figure 4** depicts the process of skills coaching, whereby facilitators teach and model a skill, then actively listen to youth and reinforce skill use. They also ensure participants can learn the skill by listening, having opportunities to practice, and engaging in observation and reflection. Coaching may involve helping youth to plan ahead, prioritize values in decision-making, exercise compassion, and find healthy ways to manage intense feelings and cope with stress.

Providing co-regulation support may improve youth engagement because facilitators are focused not only on *what* they are teaching but also on *how* they are teaching it.

Training staff to understand co-regulation and use simple strategies to support youth may be a powerful way to enhance program fidelity and improve program outcomes. Furthermore, helping youth develop and practice self-regulation skills is particularly important during adolescence, a critical period of rapid brain development and acquisition of new skills (see box below).

CRITICAL BRAIN DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE REQUIRES CONTINUED ADULT SUPPORT

Adolescence: A developmental period that begins with the onset of puberty (as early as age 9 or 10) and continues through the mid-to late-twenties.

The ongoing support of caring adults is crucial for youth during adolescence. As the bodies of adolescents mature, they also change neurobiologically and socially in ways that stimulate their development into capable and connected adults.

- Neurobiologically, the brain enters a period of rapid growth during adolescence, forming new connections and pathways. Each new experience forms new circuits in the brain, and those connections become more permanent as experiences are repeated and practiced. The areas of the brain that mature first enable youth to interpret interpersonal and emotional cues and take risks. This fosters a sense of connection with peers, promotes romantic relationships, and is necessary for independence and individual identity. Maturing later are the areas of the brain that make it easier to set long-term goals, understand the perspectives of others, form long-term commitments, and make complex decisions. These skills align with family formation, parenting, employment, and relationship stability.

- Socially, youth begin to separate from parents and guardians to become more independent. Meanwhile, they prioritize relationships with peers and test the waters of romantic relationships as a precursor to their own family and community formation. More is expected of them too from family members and from social institutions. An adolescent at age 13 is expected to engage in longer and more in-depth conversations than an 8-year-old. A 17-year-old can enlist in the military and head to combat. Though brain development is ongoing, at age 18 youth are legally considered adults suddenly gaining rights and responsibilities related to privacy, voting, marriage, investing money, signing contracts, and gambling, each adding accountability and risk.

As a result of these changes, adolescents experience intense emotions and may only see the immediate rewards of a choice instead of also seeing the impact on long-term goals. For example, they may act "in the moment" in ways that help them feel connected to peers, even if the behavior could endanger long-term goals, health, or well-being. Adolescents are also more susceptible to stress but less experienced in managing it on their own.

When youth experience chronic stressors and/or trauma such as poverty, maltreatment, food insecurity, violence, natural disasters, and national emergencies, the brain development that allows them to manage thoughts, feelings, and behavior can be seriously affected.

Without the support of caring adults, the nervous system can be overwhelmed by stress hormones, causing reactivity and delaying the growth of self-regulation pathways in the brain. This can manifest as behavior that is more disruptive, impulsive, confusing, or risky. When youth exhibit such behaviors, it can be difficult for adults to connect with and support them. Yet, it is during times of increased stress that youth need adult support more than ever. For more information on adolescent development and the impact of stress, see the Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series report on the review of studies of self-regulation and stress (Hamoudi et al., 2015) or OPRE's Self-Regulation Snapshots by age group.

Caring adults who work with youth, such as those who teach relationship education, can recognize this period as an opportunity and respond in vital ways that foster healthy relationships and individual growth. Science explains how to do this by supporting self-regulation development.

Understanding co-regulation: A model

Caring adults influence self-regulation development in youth by fostering supportive relationships and nurturing environments as a context for learning and practicing self-regulation skills. This means HMRE practitioners, as caring adults, are a critical piece of the picture. Practitioners' approach and the program culture they foster impacts how youth learn.

The co-regulation framework pictured in **Figure 2** shows the important influence of adult self-regulation and co-regulation on youth self-regulation. In the center, the green triangle represents youth self-regulation. At the base of the triangle are the skills to manage thoughts (cognitive regulation) and feelings (emotion regulation). These skill sets promote behavior regulation (top of the triangle) which combine to foster short- and long-term goal attainment. The blue donut contains the three key elements of co-regulation that staff can implement in their work with youth: warm, responsive relationships (orange); safe, supportive environments (blue); and self-regulation skills coaching (red). The depiction of adult self-regulation surrounding the pieces of the model indicates that when staff are able to manage their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, they are more effective co-regulators for the youth they serve.

**FIGURE 2
CO-REGULATION FRAMEWORK***

CO-REGULATION

Relationships
warm, supportive, accepting, nurturing

YOUTH SELF-REGULATION

Behavior Regulation

Cognitive Regulation

Emotion Regulation

Environments
supportive and safe spaces and experiences

ADULT

SELF-REGULATION

Skills Coaching
modeling, teaching, practicing, and reflecting on skills

* The evidence-based co-regulation framework is an adaptation of existing models of self-regulation (Murray et al., 2019) and co-regulation (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Adult self-regulation: Support for the adults who support youth

Reflecting on the importance of the arrow in **Figure 2**, adults are encouraged to consider ways to strengthen their own self-regulation when providing co-regulation support. Maintaining warmth, ensuring a safe environment, and being on-task for skills coaching is not always easy, given the stressors adults face each day. Life events can make it hard for adults to manage their own thoughts, feelings, and in-the-moment reactions. Like the youth they serve, facilitators also need supportive relationships, nurturing environments, and ongoing coaching so they are able to focus more fully on youth when youth need them most.

For more information about co-regulation, see *Co-Regulation from Birth through Young Adulthood: A Practice Brief, Rosanbalm and Murray, 2017.*

Research says providers are most effective in their work with youth when they are:

- **Aware** of their feelings and responses in stressful situations

- **Notice** their assumptions, thoughts, and beliefs about the behavior of youth and their implications

- **Use** strategies to remain calm and respond with compassion, even when stressed, angry, or upset (e.g., taking deep breaths, practicing positive self-talk, taking a walk)

Teaching HMRE staff to provide co-regulation support may improve youth outcomes

Relationship education is an ideal context to focus on co-regulation. HMRE programs offer life skills during adolescence, when a burst of brain development, peer connection, and independence co-occur for youth. This is a time when social demands increase and adult supports tend to decrease. The relationship information provided and skills taught in HMRE workshops are timely, relevant, and of great interest to youth. The content stimulates opportunities for HMRE facilitators to provide co-regulation support at a point when youth can benefit in lasting ways.

To do this, facilitators can use strategies tailored to enhance the three types of co-regulation support *without changing the curricula being offered to youth.* Thus, the theory of co-regulation becomes the framework that guides how services are delivered, and the strategies become the

vehicle for providing co-regulation support. Through co-regulation, adults create nurturing contexts for youth to acquire self-regulation skills. Improved self-and-co-regulation generate the conditions for optimal learning and curriculum uptake. As a result, co-regulation has the potential to enhance implementation of youth-serving programs and improve program outcomes for youth. In addition, staff benefit from using strategies for their own self-regulation and to improve co-regulation among staff in their workplace. The strategies can promote a positive work environment, reduce stress, and increase role satisfaction. See **Figure 3** for a list of strategies to consider. Building staff capacity for co-regulation is a promising approach to improve youth self-regulation, program implementation, and outcomes for HMRE programs.

The SARHM project: An example of how to integrate co-regulation into existing programs

The SARHM project, funded through a collaboration between OFA and OPRE, aimed to build the capacity of adults providing youth-serving HMRE programs by partnering with two HMRE grantee sites to develop and test strategies that enhance staff support for youth self-regulation development.[1] For more in-depth information about the SARHM project, see the _SARHM Final Report_.

Most youth programs that aim to build self-regulation do so solely by teaching self-regulation skills to youth, but do not simultaneously develop the co-regulation knowledge and skills of the adults who work with youth.

Therefore, the SARHM project specifically targeted frontline staff in HMRE programs and their supervisors as the agents of change. Because this approach was new to the field, the SARHM team began the study by doing formative research—that is, using evidence from the literature and working directly with program staff who would use these strategies to develop and refine them systematically.

The SARHM team started with a thorough review of important publications, including each of the available publications in OPRE's _Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Series_, and conducted a targeted literature review to identify evidence-based or promising strategies that promote staff

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[1] The SARHM project team included researchers with expertise in instructional design, implementation science, developmental psychology, rapid cycle evaluation, and HMRE programming.

self-regulation or warm relationships, supportive environments, and self-regulation skills coaching.

o   The team found evidence suggesting a variety of approaches, some simpler than others, that could be piloted by HMRE facilitators without altering existing program content. Based on the themes drawn from the literature, the team developed a menu of 23 new strategy ideas that seemed feasible and relevant for HMRE service delivery. Then they discussed the strategies with experts and sites.

o   In the next phase, the team interviewed staff at eight HMRE grantee sites and selected two with whom to partner. One site worked with students in four urban high schools. The second site was a community-based organization working with 17- to 23-year-old youth who were formerly in foster care. The project team met in person with representative staff at each site. After giving background on the processes of self-regulation and co-regulation, the SARHM team heard from program staff about their needs and goals, both as staff and for youth. The SARHM team shared the menu of strategy ideas and engaged in a process to select those that each site wanted to further develop and pilot. This allowed the team to develop a variety of approaches tailored to different programs and populations.

o   Next, the team used a process called formative rapid-cycle evaluation to apply the co-regulation model to practice. The process involved developing the strategies, systematically gathering feedback from facilitators, observers, and youth, and analyzing data about the implementation of the strategies to make real-time improvements.

o   Each site tested strategies in three cycles scheduled to suit their individual program's timeline. During each cycle, staff tried the co-regulation strategies, and the SARHM team collected feedback from staff and observers using self-administered questionnaires and observation forms.[2] SARHM researchers analyzed the feedback, noted themes, and made targeted improvements to the strategy. The revised strategy was implemented in the next cycle, following the same process.

o   The SARHM team and program staff were full partners during the process, engaging in implementation coaching, identifying and trouble-shooting mid-cycle challenges, and providing contemporaneous feedback.

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[2] See the [forthcoming Observation Measures Brief] for information about how to assess for co-regulation through observation.

Co-regulation strategies tested and refined through SARHM

To foster co-regulation in HMRE programs, the SARHM team integrated discrete, targeted strategies that aimed to enhance each category of co-regulation **(See Figure 3)**. Some strategies also aimed to support staff self-regulation or improve the co-regulation between staff in the workplace. Youth-serving programs that wish to foster co-regulation in their work can select one strategy to strengthen facilitator-participant relationships, one to enhance the environment, and a third to improve skills coaching, or focus first on workplace strategies. The *SARHM Co-Regulation in Practice Series* provides additional information and specific resources for using select strategies refined through the project.

FIGURE 3 CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES FOR HMRE PRACTITIONERS

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
Workplace strategies that promote adult self-regulation or co-regulation focus	
Environment Scan	Staff complete a worksheet on the workplace environment, prompting them to notice and modify stressors and barriers to productivity and focus in their envronment.
Take Note, Tag It, Tune In (T3)	Staff pause to notice sensations in the body, identify and write associated feelings, and use pre-identified strategies to tune or manage intense emotions when needed.
Personal Goal-Setting	Staff complete a worksheet on small, achievable goals; identify action steps; encourage use of a "support buddy"; and discuss progress toward individual goals as a team.
Co-regulation Prompts in Supervision	Supervisor selects a self-regulation champion, uses tools for growth mindset in the workplace, and asks targeted questions in meetings to enhance reflection and intention around co-regulation.
Warm, responsive relationships	
Welcoming Strategies	Participants complete a short worksheet on how they prefer facilitators to interact with them. Facilitators greet each participant personally at each workshop and check in individually with 1-2 participants during or after each class.
Positive Praise	In group or individual sessions, facilitators provide either two-part verbal praise (by saying the participant's name + the specific effort/behavior being praised) or four-part written praise (which includes the participant name + specific behavior + praise effort not natural ability + share the value of that effort to the program or community). In the workplace, staff exchange four-part positive praise notes (name + specific behavior + praise of effort + value to the program or community).

FIGURE 3 CO-REGULATION STRATEGIES FOR HMRE PRACTITIONERS (continued)

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
Supportive environments	
Group Agreement	Facilitators solicit values from participants that participants want to foster in their group (e.g., inclusive), define each value using specific behaviors (what will be observed when the value is enacted), and obtain visible agreement from each member to uphold the values (e.g., raise your hand or stand if you support these values). Facilitators reference values during every session and allow participants to adjust specifics as needed. Facilitators model and reinforce values and behaviors.
Rest and Return	Participants have permission to take a break if they are experiencing intense emotions or need a physical or mental rest. Participants commit to returning when they feel better. In the workplace, staff establish an area to take a break if they are experiencing intense emotions or need a physical or mental rest. Staff also take breaks if needed while working with participants in the community.
Skills coaching	
Bookending	Facilitators end the session with active practice of a self-regulation skill from the curriculum or planning time for its use; subsequently, facilitators begin the next session with a prompt to reflect on the use of that skill since the last session.
Breath to Refocus	Facilitators coach participants to use deep breaths to regain focus during transitions or times of intense emotion and models the exercise by doing it with participants.
Take Note	Participants practice brief mindfulness or "noticing" exercises in the sessions or individually. Staff practice these exercises as a group or individually.

Co-regulation: Skills coaching

What does it mean to coach self-regulation skills?

The steps of self-regulation skills coaching are depicted in **Figure 4**. This image lists the self-regulation skills coaching steps involved in the facilitator's role (green) and the participant's role (orange). Although facilitators and participants engage in a parallel process, the primary responsibility is on the facilitators to ensure that both they and the participants have the opportunity for each step of the process when learning a skill.

First, the facilitator must teach a skill, such as communication, problem-solving, pausing to breathe or think before acting, or demonstrating commitment or acceptance **(See Figures 1 and 3 for types of skills and strategies that can be coached)**. Next, the skill must be modeled so participants can envision its use in real-world settings. While facilitators implement these two steps, participants engage in a parallel process of learning the skill by listening to the instruction and then practicing the skill in real-time. Finally, facilitators can provide an opportunity to debrief the coaching experience that includes actively listening to participants as they observe and reflect on using the skill, and providing reinforcement for ongoing practice, reflection, and refinement.

**FIGURE 4
SELF-REGULATION SKILLS COACHING INFOGRAPHIC**

Lessons learned from the SARHM Project

The SARHM process provided an opportunity to develop co-regulation strategies with frontline staff at two sites and test on a small scale how programs received and integrated a co-regulation framework. HMRE staff reported that the information and training gave them new clarity about how to serve their participants' needs and how to deliver their programs. Here are a few lessons learned from the SARHM Project.

o **Integrating co-regulation strategies into HMRE programming for youth is feasible and shows promise for supporting implementation and youth engagement.**

As with most new program ideas, facilitators said they initially viewed the strategies as more work and feared they lacked time to use the strategies or that strategies might encroach on time needed to deliver the HMRE curriculum. As facilitators tested and were coached on the strategies, over time their comfort increased and they became more familiar with the strategies' purpose. Youth were more responsive to the strategies as facilitators reported more confidence using them. Integrating co-regulation strategies took time, intention, and ongoing support. Over time, the process of coaching yielded deeper learning and insights about how to use the strategies. According to facilitators, the co-regulation strategies showed promise for increasing youth engagement in the HMRE lessons during the group sessions.

o **It is important to infuse co-regulation and self-regulation principles at all levels of the program, in the workplace, in staff-supervisor relationships, and in interactions with participants.**

In SARHM, using co-regulation to shape project team interactions with program staff helped program staff learn how to apply the concepts to their work with youth. Facilitators were receptive to trying workplace self-regulation strategies and described greater learning from personal application of the approach as well as improvements in workplace relationships and morale. Over time, piloting the strategies facilitated a change in mindset that allowed program staff began to see the role they played in youths' capacity to self-regulate.

○ **When researchers and practitioners work together, adding co-regulation to current programming is practical and sustainable.**

Program staffs' understanding of their context and the youth they served was critical for tailoring co-regulation strategies to staff and youth needs. Partnering researchers well-versed in the literature, theory, and process of co-regulation with staff well-versed in their program context facilitated more effective strategy development and promoted longer-term integration of co-regulation into practice. Staff had high investment in the process and outcome. Although the project has ended, staff continue to use a co-regulation framework in their service delivery approach.

Summary

Adolescence is a critical time for youth to develop the self-regulation skills that are linked to lifelong well-being. Adults play a vital role in supporting and fostering that development. HMRE program staff are well positioned to influence self-regulation development through co-regulation in workshops or one-on-one meetings with youth. Results from the SARHM project speak to the promise of integrating co-regulation strategies and measures in HMRE programs, as well as the impact of a collaborative design and implementation process for building program capacity around co-regulation knowledge and facilitation skill. Regardless of the curriculum used, and without changing content or reducing fidelity, SARHM demonstrated that HMRE staff can expand their co-regulation capacity by using simple strategies linked to each type of co-regulation support. The SARHM results suggest that building staff capacity for co-regulation is a promising approach to improve youth self-regulation, program implementation, and outcomes for HMRE programs. Focusing on self-regulation development and co-regulation may be a critical factor for HMRE programs in promoting healthy relationships for youth and for the adults who serve them.

Steps for Applying the Co-Regulation Model to Your Program

Below, we propose three steps to make co-regulation a part of your practice and inform your program delivery approach. The Co-Regulation in Practice Series offers additional information about self-regulation and co-regulation and serves as a "how to" guide for using selected strategies in your program (Frei et al, 2021).

1. **Learn about self-regulation and co-regulation by exploring your own experience and the resources OPRE provides.**

NOTICE what helps or hinders your own self-regulation.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What do you do in the moment when you start to feel very angry with someone?
- What thoughts come to mind when things don't go your way? Do the thoughts make things better or worse?
- How do you calm down when you feel stressed or overwhelmed?
- Do you notice yourself wishing you'd acted differently or regretting something you said?
- What do you do to stay focused on your overarching priorities when something in the short-term gets in the way?

REVIEW two important practice briefs and one report for a more in-depth explanation of self-regulation by developmental age and how to support it through co-regulation:

- *Promoting Self-Regulation in Adolescents and Young Adults*
- *Co-Regulation from Birth through Young Adulthood*
- *Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress: Foundations for Understanding Self-Regulation from an Applied Developmental Perspective*

2. **Engage staff to explore self-regulation, why it matters, and how to support it through co-regulation. Provide training and ongoing professional development.**

HOLD a staff meeting to explore the constructs of self-regulation and co-regulation. Practitioner resources to guide your discussion are available on *OPRE's website.*

ASK staff targeted questions about **relationships** in the meeting.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What are we consistently doing to help participants feel known and welcome?
- How do we convey warmth?
- How can participants experience us as responsive?
- How do we practice these qualities with each other in our workplace?

EXPLORE the program **environment**.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- Can participants feel safe to be themselves in this environment?
- Can they focus on learning, or are there distractions?
- What can I change about the environment to make it feel more inclusive and promote learning and reflection?

ENCOURAGE staff to tune into their senses (sight, sound, smell, etc.). Ask these same questions about how staff feel in the workshop environment and in their workplace.

EXPLORE how systematically your program staff coach participants to use **skills**.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- Do participants have the opportunity to learn and then practice skills in real time?
- Are we discussing and reflecting on how the skills are going?
- With your staff, brainstorm observable or measurable actions that could enhance relationships, the environment, and skills coaching between staff and participants, or among staff in the workplace. Review the co-regulation strategies shown in the table below. Are any of these strategies relevant for your program? See SARHM's *Co-Regulation in Practice Series* for a guide to implementing selected strategies (Frei et al., 2021).

3. Select a few strategies to test in your workshops and workplace.

TRY a new strategy on a small scale and gather feedback. Doing so allows you to troubleshoot the strategy, tailor it to your program, and improve its implementation with less risk.[3]

DECIDE which of the opportunities your team discussed in Step 2 are the first priorities for your program to address. For example, perhaps your team noted a lot of cross talk and distractions between participants during some curriculum topics, or that facilitators are often sitting in the front of the room and not interacting with participants as often as they could, or that more opportunity is needed for real-time skills practice.

CONSIDER selecting a few strategies from your brainstormed list or from the tables below and adapting them to your setting. Once you've picked a strategy that will address the problem, create a concrete and detailed list of action steps that staff need to take to implement the strategy and what you hope each step will achieve.

IDENTIFY a small set of staff who will test the strategy for a short period of time (if you have a small staff, it could be everybody). In your plan, include enough time for staff to get comfortable using the strategy and collect enough feedback to make an informed assessment of how the strategy worked. You likely will want to try the strategy for at least four weeks. Build in time to process the feedback and reflect on what changes you'd like to make.

OBSERVE the implementation and notice what is or is not working well. Note any observable shifts in staff and youth. Ask staff to report their experience and, after a period of testing the strategies, consider making any changes that seem needed to improve the strategy.

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[3] The SARHM project adapted a process called Learn, Innovate, Improve, developed by ACF and Mathematica, to test and refine strategies. More information on Learn, Innovate, Improve can be found in this brief: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/learn-innovate-improve-li2-enhancing-programs-and-improving-lives.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- How will you check on adherence to the steps of the strategy (and their intended goals?

- How will staff and observers provide feedback about what is or is not working?

- How frequently will facilitators report their experiences? What questions do you have about the strategy that you want to answer?

- How can you get feedback from participants?

TRY the revised strategy with another small, short pilot. Keep communication open and bidirectional between staff and supervisors.

Being intentional to integrate co-regulation can enhance staff satisfaction as well as participant engagement, retention, and learning.

Additional SARHM Resources for Practitioners

The SARHM project resulted in information, resources, and guidance for the HMRE field, including:

- **Co-Regulation in Practice Series:** A series of practical, co-regulation focused strategies for HMRE facilitators and staff to use in their practice (Frei et al., 2021).

- **Observation Measures Brief:** Information about a measure developed to assess co-regulation in HMRE programs using observation (Alamillo et al., 2021).

- **SARHM Final Report:** Lessons to inform the field about applying co-regulation theory to practice, developing and refining strategies, recommended next steps, and areas for future research (Baumgartner et al., 2020).