

# What You Need to Know.

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

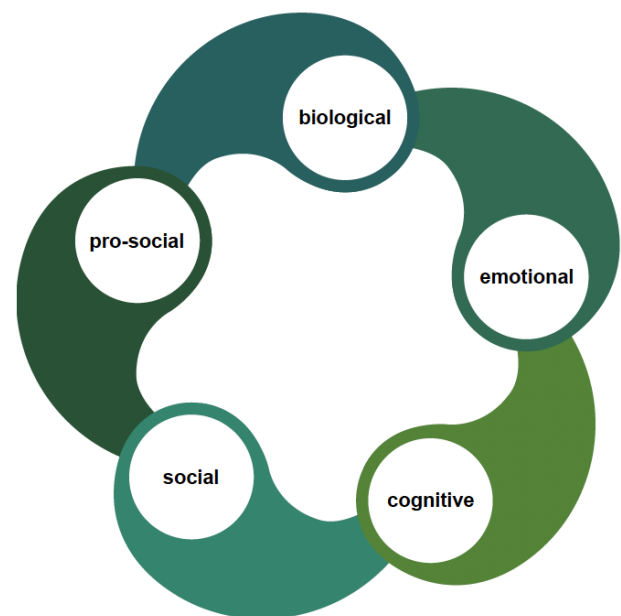
## Self-Regulation: 5 Domains of Self-Reg

### The Shanker Self-Reg® Framework

- Self-regulation refers to the manner in which an individual deals with stress, in all its many forms, and then recovers from the energy expended.
- An individual (child or adult) exposed to too much stress in the early years, may develop a “kindled alarm system,” in which even relatively minor stressors can send them into fight-or-flight or freeze.
- A child who is chronically hypo- or hyperaroused as a result of excessive stress more readily goes into fight-or-flight, or freezes.
- Self-Reg helps us consider self-regulation and stress across five interrelated domains: biological, emotion, cognitive, social and prosocial
- Shanker Self-Reg® is a powerful method for understanding stress and managing energy flow. Self-Reg is not a program, but rather a practical paradigm through which parents and teachers can better understand children’s stress, and enhance self-regulation.

The Shanker Method® is a five-step method for enhancing self-regulation in children, youth, young adults, and adults:

1. Read the signs of stress and reframe the behaviour
2. Recognize the stressors
3. Reduce the stress
4. Reflect: enhance stress awareness
5. Respond: develop strategies for responding to stress and returning to calm



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### The Biological Domain

- The development of a child's brain has extensive implications for the early years and their effects on long-term mental and physical health.
- By being regulated a child develops the ability to self-regulate. Being regulated does not mean being managed.
- Early childhood educators can learn to recognize a child's states of arousal and up-regulate or down-regulate their behavior to maintain optimal regulation.
- There are four neural mechanisms for dealing with stress: (1) social engagement; (2) fight-or-flight (3) freeze; and, (4) dissociation. The brain uses the "hierarchy" for responding to threat. If one proves inadequate to deal with the present stress, the brain shifts to the next. Social engagement is the goal.
- A child becomes chronically hypoaroused or hyperaroused if their central control system for stress has become overwhelmed and loses its resilience.
- A chronically hypoaroused or hyperaroused child has difficulty staying focused and alert, which is the optimal state for learning to occur.
- Children who are chronically zoned out, hyperactive, and/or aggressive are not somehow 'weak' or purposefully acting out. They are experiencing too much stress for social engagement or their cognitive processes to cope.
- We need to "reframe," not just children's behavior, but parenting styles as well. Self-Reg was designed with precisely this purpose in mind.

### The Emotion Domain

- Many children, especially young ones, find it very difficult to "monitor, evaluate, and modify" their emotions.
- Using "left-brain processes" like language and executive functions to regulate a child's emotions will not be effective if the child's left brain is "off-line" as a result of all the adrenaline pumping in the hyperaroused state.
- The more flooded (hyperaroused) the child the less capacity he or she has to "monitor, evaluate and modify" her emotions.
- If a child is in a flooded state, parents and early childhood educators need to help the child calm down, not try to force them to monitor, evaluate and modify what they're feeling.
- Young children experience intense emotional reactions that can be sudden and feel catastrophic—all-or-nothing.
- It can feel overwhelming to a parents and early childhood educators when they can't seem to help a child calm down or cheer up.
- Sometimes a child is so overwrought or angry that nothing you say or do seems to help. This happens, not because a child's "braking mechanism" is defective, and certainly not because they aren't "trying hard enough," but because they are so aroused that they can't register what we're saying or doing.
- Parents and early childhood educators need to soothe before they try to "educate."

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## The Cognitive Domain

- Cognition refers to any of the mental processes involved in knowledge acquisition: things like attention, perception, memory, and problem-solving.
- Self-Reg in this domain is concerned with the cognitive foundation of these processes: the so-called roots of attention.
- Attention involves the body as much as the mind; the roots of child's ability to pay attention can be strengthened.
- Sustained concentration makes a highenergy, high-cost demand on a child's autonomic nervous system.
- A child who is uncomfortable for any reason in a learning situation will have to work harder to concentrate than a child who is calm and alert.
- Problems self-regulating in any of the other domains can seriously constrain a child's ability to focus on a task.
- For some children, just trying to sit still or inhibit an impulse takes an enormous amount of energy and there may not be enough left to sustain attention.
- When we work on the roots of attentional problems we look at things like the child's ability to register and integrate different kinds of sensory information.
- Many children need our help to gradually reach the point of being calm, focused and working quietly on their own.
- Many attentional problems are due to sensory processing challenges (auditory, visual etc.), which can be subtle and easily overlooked.
- If a child has a processing problem, his inability to attend and focus is never caused by a lack of motivation, but over time it can lead to a lack of motivation.
- Various play-based techniques can help us address the roots of attention; but above all can help us work on the child's self-regulation.
- A child's distraction, impulsivity, inability to listen, low frustration tolerance and other challenging behaviors are all a consequence of hyperarousal.
- The more stressed he becomes the less he can attend to what he's looking at or feeling and anticipate what is going to happen next, which increases his stress and renders him even more inattentive.
- Shutting down and hyper-focusing on something are ways of blocking out the stress.
- Self-Reg enables us to break the "arousal cycle" by keeping a child's stress load within a manageable band so we can teach the child how to manage this on own.
- The better the child learns how to identify and reduce the stressors that render him inattentive, the better he will be recognize patterns in what hither to has been a "blooming, buzzing confusion."

## The Social Domain

- Problems in the social domain lie in the arousal created by the system that serves as a child's first line of defense for dealing with stress: the social engagement system.
- Urging a child try harder in the social domain can make the child even more tense and unsure of herself in social situations.

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- What we need to understand is, what we can do to enhance the capacity for connectedness in kids who find social interaction stressful.
- If a fight-or-flight reaction to social situations becomes entrenched, the child will shy away from what she most desperately needs when she is frightened or anxious: the calming presence of a caregiver or other children.
- Turning inward is what is really involved if we go into fight-or-flight: the brain has shifted to the so-called “survival brain.”
- It is extremely hard for children to use words to communicate when they are feeling this way
- In fight-or-flight, even the most benign of social acts can be interpreted as a threat. These sorts of distortions are a sign that a child has gone into a state of low energy/ high tension. The child’s immediate need is to be soothed and caregivers need to re-establish the child’s sense of safety.
- “Threats” come in all shapes and sizes. Some threats are very easy to define. Sometimes the threat is simply a look, a vocalization, a gesture, a movement or, alternatively, the lack of a look, a vocalization, a gesture, a movement
- When a child feels threatened the result can be sympathetic flooding (anger and aggression, flight or desertion) or parasympathetic flooding (withdrawal, paralysis).
- A child will find herself overwhelmed by situations that outstrip her social abilities, and she will be likely to respond aggressively or withdraw from such situations.
- The problem for such a child may be that she can’t “read” what other children are feeling from their faces, or has trouble following conversational twists and turns. She doesn’t understand why what she said or did elicited a fear or anger response on the face of the child she was engaging with. Everyone in the group seems to be on the same page except her; everyone laughs at the joke except her.
- Children with problems in the social domain need to learn to do Self-Reg in social situations, because first and foremost they have to learn what they can do to feel safe.
- Nature’s mechanism for socialization in the early years is play.

### The Pro-social Domain

- The crux of Self-Reg is that we born with a brain that expects social engagement.
- Antisocial behaviour in a child is not the norm.
- Clearly there are biological mechanisms that, in the wrong circumstances, lead to antisocial behaviour.
- Equally clearly, there are biological mechanisms that, in the right circumstances, lead to prosocial behaviour.
- Instead of asking how you compel a child to behave prosocially, through a lens of self-regulation we ask: what sets a child on an antisocial path?
- The answer lies in stress overload: Fight-or-flight shuts down digestion, cellular repair, immune system, and PFC systems that subserve mindreading and communication.



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- Stress overload shuts down the very systems that enable us to experience “cognitive empathy”: not just being affected by, but aware of what someone else feels.
- When social engagement shuts down, ancient systems run the show: systems that predate the Social Brain relying on aggression or escape to deal with threat.
- Some children are born susceptible to limbic arousal, or had experiences that kindled the limbic system. If the limbic system is hyperaroused, impulses intensify while social and self-awareness decline, The child can’t share, sympathize, or communicate. Someone else’s arousal is so stressful that it triggers fight-or-flight or freeze.
- What is critical in such situations is how we respond to the child’s anxiety, which can manifest in acts of aggression.
- Chastising a child for his lack of empathy, shouting when a child needs to be soothed, escalating when the child needs to down-regulate, can make things worse. Instead we have to do Self-Reg, on ourselves as well as with the child.
- Early learning centres and schools provide us with the perfect opportunity, not just to explain, but also to model this behaviour for parents.

### Learn more

Contact The MEHRIT Centre at [info@selfreg.ca](mailto:info@selfreg.ca) or visit [www.self-reg.ca](http://www.self-reg.ca) for further information.

