



# How teachers co-regulate children's emotions and behaviour in socio-emotionally challenging situations in day-care settings



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the ways early childhood teachers co-regulate children's activities, behaviour and emotions in various socio-emotionally challenging situations and how teachers identify the co-regulation strategies they use in these situations. The data consist of 31 video episodes of different socio-emotionally challenging situations among children aged 2–5 years in day-care activities. The data also include stimulated recall interviews conducted with the teachers ( $N=8$ ). Based on the video episodes, the video data are analysed by exploring co-regulation strategies that the teachers use in challenging situations. Interview data are analysed by comparing teachers' descriptions of co-regulation strategy use to the co-regulation categories formed in the video analysis. The results of this study show that teachers engage in co-regulation during day-care activities. They use various strategies and combine these when they encounter challenges, particularly favouring activity-related strategies instead of emotion-related strategies. Furthermore, the results indicate that the teachers are, to some extent, aware of their co-regulative strategy use, but they could benefit from training that would increase their awareness of different strategies that potentially support children's self-regulation in socio-emotionally challenging early childhood contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Learning how to regulate emotional responses and behaviour related to these in adaptive and socially acceptable ways is an essential part of children's successful development (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007; Boekaerts, 2011; Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007; McRae et al., 2012; McLaughlin, 2008). In children's early years, most emotion and behaviour regulation is conducted externally: through interactions with parents or teachers (Morris et al., 2007; Calkins & Hill, 2007; McClelland & Cameron, 2011; Whitebread et al., 2009). In particular, sensitive and responsive interactions have been found to be positively related to children's self-regulation skills (Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Gaertner, 2007; Colman, Hardy, Albert, Raffaelli, & Crockett, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002). Taking this relationship into account, arguments that teachers struggle with regulating students' emotions as well as the emotional climate of the whole classroom need to be acknowledged (Fried, 2011; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). Teachers need a more profound

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understanding of how to support children's development of self-regulation skills in order to promote children's learning processes (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005).

As a comprehensive concept, self-regulation refers to the ability to engage in goal-directed actions by managing emotions, behaviour and cognitive processes (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Neuenschwander et al., 2012) and by adaptively using metacognition, motivation and strategic actions (Perry & Winne, 2006; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2007). Among young children, the development of cognitive, behavioural and emotional self-regulation processes is strongly intertwined (Bronson, 2000; Blair & Diamond, 2008). In particular, in socio-emotionally challenging situations, self-regulation skills manifest as an ability to adapt to situations by inhibiting inappropriate behaviour and preferring socially appropriate behaviours even when they are not in accordance with the individual's first response (Whitebread & Basilio, 2012; Morris et al., 2007). In classroom interaction, socio-emotional challenges mainly occur when the children have opposite or variant goals or interpretations of the situation compared to other children or teachers (Järvenoja, Volet, & Järvelä, 2012; Arsenio & Lover, 1997). Children need support in interpreting challenging situations, correctly interpreting the cues from the situation (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000), and understanding the expected behaviour or strategies available to regulate themselves or others (Morris et al., 2007; Bronson, 2000); thus, challenging situations also create opportunities for children to rehearse skills to regulate behaviour and emotions (Bronson, 2000; McClelland & Cameron, 2011; Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007).

In this study, the term 'co-regulation' is used to refer to teachers' activities that attempt to support and scaffold children's participation in day-care activities by modifying children's thoughts, behaviour or emotions according to the expectations and values of that particular context (Volet, Summers, & Thurman, 2009; Colman et al., 2006). Co-regulation has been regarded as a process in a momentary unequal situation in social regulation where one person takes a guiding role toward others in a social learning situation (Volet, Summers, & Thurman, 2009; Järvenoja, Järvelä, & Malmberg, 2015). From a socio-cultural perspective, co-regulation has been regarded as sharing the self-regulatory processes and thinking of the more capable other. From these interactions, the learner gradually internalises regulation processes (McCasslin, 2009; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Hadwin & Oshige, 2011); thus, interactions between a teacher and a child are assumed to have an effect on the child's development of self-regulation skills (Colman et al., 2006; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012; McCasslin, 2009).

This study focuses on the co-regulation strategies that teachers use in naturalistic and interactional day-care settings and compares teachers' observed co-regulation strategies to teachers' own identification of strategies in stimulated recall interviews. The analysis focuses on socio-emotionally challenging situations because here, it is possible to identify the actualised strategies directed toward the emotions and conditions of emotionally challenging activities so that the conflicts can be resolved or avoided (Gross & Thompson, 2006; Järvenoja et al., 2012).

## 2. Supporting children's self-regulation skills

The importance of studying the co-regulation strategies that teachers use when interacting with children in socio-emotionally challenging situations stems from previous research that links parents' and teachers' qualities of interactions with children to the different levels of children's abilities to self-regulate their emotions and behaviour. In particular, sensitive and responsive interactions (Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004; Colman et al., 2006; von Suchodoletz, Trommsdorff, & Heikamp, 2011; McCoy and Raver, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002) as well as emotionally expressive and collaborative environments (Fried, 2011) have been discovered to have a positive relationship with children's abilities to regulate their emotions and behaviour. Studies also indicate a correlation between non-supportive and punitive responses and lower levels of children's emotion regulation skills (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010; Spinrad et al., 2007; Valiente et al., 2010). It is suggested that caregivers' reactions to children's negative emotions provide children with information about experiencing and expressing emotions. Supportive responses may help children to reduce their negative emotions and understand emotions in general; they can also directly teach children ways to deal with emotions. Non-supportive responses to children's emotions may in turn increase negative emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998) and the use of inappropriate and maladaptive strategies (e.g. escape, revenge-seeking) to regulate emotions (Jones, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 2002).

When it comes to specific strategies to support children's self-regulation, offering children 'verbal tools' for self-regulation and increasing their awareness and knowledge about emotional expressions, situations and moods are regarded as effective ways to scaffold children in self-regulation skills (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002). Labelling and validating children's emotions and helping them to problem-solve may increase their understanding of emotions and reduce negative emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1998). In situations where negative emotions have already emerged, calm and neutral reactions to children's anger have proven to lessen their levels of expressed anger and fearfulness (Morris et al., 2007). Strategies for redirecting children's attention, cognitive reappraising or choosing or avoiding emotionally provoking situations (e.g. niche-picking, situation selection) may also serve as effective ways to regulate children's emotions (Gross, 2014).

In addition to parent-child interactions, teacher-child interactions make a difference in children's behavioural regulation, school achievement and learning motivation (Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009; Pakarinen, 2012). For example, in a kindergarten context, it has been found that children who are more likely to struggle with adapting to classroom rules showed less off-task behaviour, were more self-reliant and conducted less negative behaviour when they had a highly sensitive teacher (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002). In a study conducted by Hamre and Pianta (2005), children aged 2–5 years who were at risk of school failure achieved more and had less conflict when they had teachers who

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