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THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-REGULATION

Stuart Shanker, Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy and Psychology, York University, Director of the Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative (MEHRI), York University and Lori Nichols, Senior Health Services Resource Nurse, Children's Aid Society of Toronto

Current research indicates that a broad range of the physical and mental health problems we are dealing with in children and adolescents stem from problems in self-regulation. Self-regulation is distinct from self-control; it refers to the biological resources that enable a child to acquire or exercise the skills involved in self control (Lillas & Turnbull 2009). Mental health problems can begin in the early years of life. In essence, infants and toddlers who are exposed to internal or external stress beyond their current capacity to regulate are at risk of becoming chronically hypo- or hyper-aroused with significant downstream consequences for their physical and/or mental wellbeing (Shanker, in press).

Physicians and pediatricians can play an essential preventative role by helping parents to understand their infant's biological strengths and to develop strategies for remediating areas of weakness and/or matching demands and stimuli to a child's stress capacity. Even the most routine of office procedures can be transformed into a profound learning experience for doctor and parents alike, once viewed through the lens of self-regulation.

The process of assessment can start from the moment a family enters the waiting room by observing how they deal with the stress of waiting for an appointment in an environment that, despite the omnipresent aquarium, is rarely designed to maximize self-regulation. Then we can see how the child responds to being poked and prodded by a strange adult, or being weighed

and measured on a machine that might be unsteady, unfamiliar or noisy. An examination offers the physician a wonderful opportunity to actually feel and hear through her stethoscope how the child responds to a stressful situation and to observe how parents distract and comfort their child. When shared, these observations can help parents to attend to their child's regulatory responses. It also offers an opportunity for the physician to help the child become mindful of his own strategies for dealing with stress ("I saw that, even though you were so scared, your whole body began to calm down when I asked you to take a deep breath"). Even something as innocuous as an eye exam offers a wonderful opportunity to observe how well a child complies with a request or responds to a mild stressor, such as not being able to read a line he or she finds difficult.

If the physician suspects that a child has self-regulatory problems she can begin discussing effective strategies that the parents can employ to help their child. Just having their attention drawn to how calm their child becomes when comforted can have a dramatic effect on a parent's awareness of their child's needs and their own approach to parenting. Regular immunization visits offer the perfect opportunity to monitor the family's progress in regulating a child's responses to the stressors that have become ubiquitous in contemporary culture.

The importance of self-regulation is also relevant to many of the older children who have behavioral



and/or emotional problems. Pediatricians could play a pivotal role in helping parents to understand the importance of everyday interactions and connections: in other words, building and constantly reinforcing self-regulation strategies and providing a responsive environment. For older children, they can help parents understand the vital importance of practices that will enhance the child's self-regulation and activities the child is engaging in that are drain the child's reserves.

In essence, the pediatrician could advise parents in the following areas:

1. Help parents understand the effect of stress on their child, and start to observe what things help to regulate their child's responses.
2. Help parents understand the importance of activities that promote optimal self-regulation: e.g., exercise, playing outside, increasing creative playtime, improving diet, beneficial sleep routines, interactive family time, etc.
3. Help parents understand the importance of limiting activities that inhibit optimal self-regulation: e.g., taking the TV out of their child's bedroom, reducing or eliminating screen time, reducing structure, reducing developmentally inappropriate formal educational demands, avoiding pesticides and other toxins, etc.
4. Help parents develop specific activities and approaches that build regulatory skills:
 - Help the child to become mindful of his or her own arousal states.
 - Help the child develop strategies for staying calmly focused and alert.
 - Enhance the child's ability to communicate his emotional needs.
 - Expand his or her emotional range.
 - Expand the range of stressors with which the child can cope.
5. Help parents become mindful of their own arousal states and develop their own self-regulating strategies, helping them recognize that their own regulation helps their child's regulation.
6. Determine if and why a child is chronically hypo- or hyperaroused and what can be done to reduce the stress load.
7. Provide written information on self-regulation.
8. If behaviour does not change then perhaps suggest a referral to a home visiting program (e.g. Healthy Babies Healthy Children for young children; or a children's mental health clinic) to provide a complete assessment.

Conclusion

Because physicians may be the only health care professionals that consistently have contact with an infant, they are in a perfect position to share information about self-regulation. Helping parents to understand and assist development of competent self regulation early in their children's lives can help set a solid foundation that decreases risks of regulatory disorders, and enhances mental health of families.

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Infant Mental Health Rounds Presentations

SELF REGULATION



presentation
December 6, 2011 by

Dr. Stuart Shanker

Dr. Shanker is Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at York University and Director of the Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative (MEHRI) at York University, a privately funded initiative whose goal is to build on new knowledge of the brain's development, and help set children (including those with developmental disorders) on the path towards emotional and intellectual health. Dr. Shanker has also recently been appointed the Director of Enhancing the Potential in Children (EPIC), an international initiative created to promote the educational potential in children by enhancing their self-regulation.

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