



Calm, alert, and learning: who wouldn't want their child in that optimal state of mind? Naturally, your child's overall health – both physical and mental – is a priority for your life as a parent. And who would guess that a major influence on our health as adults and kids lies deep inside the brain, in a system that regulates how well we respond to stress. The beating of your child's heart, your child's breathing, digestion, how well your child pays attention and learns, even your child's facial expressions and ability to hear your voice are all controlled by this system in the brain.

This internal regulation systems acts like the thermostat on your furnace. Let's say you set the thermostat to 18° degrees. The furnace works around this setpoint by turning on when the temperature falls below about 15° and turns off when the temperature hits 21°. But the thermostat can break if it gets overused, and the same thing can happen to your child's 'brain thermostat' when there is too much stress. The thermostat, or ability to self-regulate, simply gets overwhelmed.

It's usually pretty obvious when your home thermostat breaks down; the house is too cold or too hot. It's also pretty straightforward for you child. Here are some simple signs that a child's stress system is overworking:

- Your child has a lot of trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Is very crabby in the morning
- Gets upset easily—even over little things-- and has trouble calming down when this happens
- Has a really volatile mood
- Has trouble paying attention, or even hearing your voice
- Gets angry too often, or seems to be overly sad, fearful, or anxious

If those signs are evident in your child, you can help by “playing detective” and exploring what the reasons might be that have led to the stresses that resulted in the observed behaviours. Even very young children can actively engage in figuring out why they are in a state that isn't pleasant or comfortable for them or for you. Stress might be coming from all sorts of things. Any combination of the following can lead to stress that can upset the thermostat. Your child might be:

- Sensitive to lights or noises or crowds or strong smells

Self-Regulation Information Bulletin #1: A Parent Guide

- Underslept
- Responding to the effects of too much junk food or sugar
- Under-exercised or inactive
- Watching too much TV or spending too much time playing video games

Your wishes are the same as your child's: to be happy, have friends, interests and success at school. Here are some steps you can take with your child to get there:

1. Be detectives: Try to identify and reduce the stressors in your child's life.
2. Help your child learn what needs to be cut back on, and maybe even avoided.
3. Help your child to learn what it feels like to be calm.
4. Help your child figure out what helps to calm down when agitated
5. Lastly, and most importantly, help your children understand how important it is to do all this on their own.

Sound difficult? With a little bit of support, these are proven steps towards having a happier, and healthier child. And though they may seem difficult, with the right kind of support, the results can happen fast. Talk to your teacher, or visit www.self-regulation.ca for further information.

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