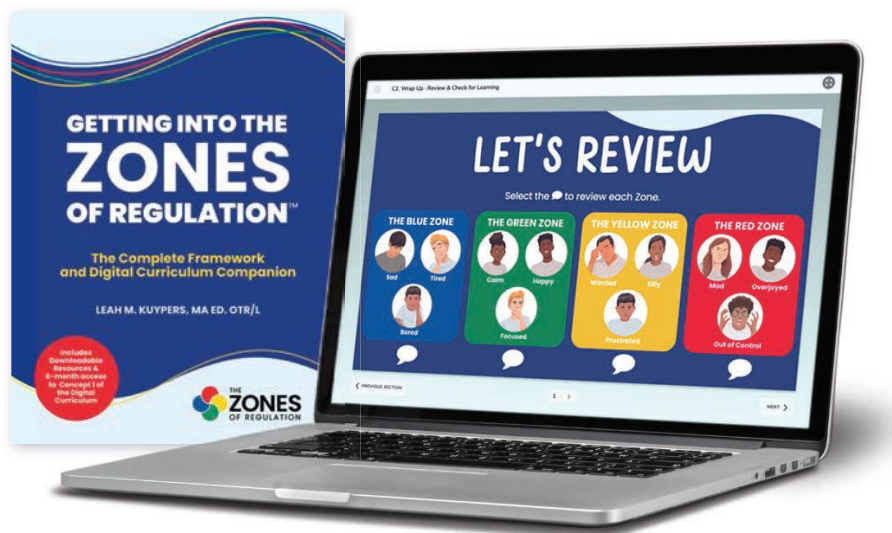




WHAT IS REGULATION?

By Leah Kuypers

Leah Kuypers, MA Ed., OTR/L is the author of *The Zones of Regulation® Digital Curriculum* (zonesofregulation.com, 2024) and *Getting Into The Zones of Regulation: The Complete Framework and Digital Curriculum Companion*. (Think Social Publishing, 2024) Leah Kuypers is an internationally recognized trainer, consultant and speaker on regulation and social emotional learning.



Most simply defined, regulation is to adjust, manage, or control something so it works well. When applied to humans, regulation can go by many names, such as “self-control,” “self-management,” “emotional control,” “anger management,” or “impulse control.” These terms all describe a person’s ability to adjust their state of alertness, energy level, and emotions to help them attain personal goals, meet the demands of the situation around them, and gain a sense of well-being. Physiologically, when we are regulated, our brain and body, integrated via the nervous system, work together to manage the situation at hand. Being regulated can play out in many ways, such as:

- Asking for help when you’re feeling stressed from a writing assignment
- Using journaling to help you cope when you’re feeling down and distraught
- Or revving yourself up to play in a football game when your energy is low

We regulate all the following processes: sensory input and needs, internal nervous system states, emotions, energy levels, impulse, behavior, as well as things like our temperature, bladder, hunger and thirst.

Dysregulation is the opposite of regulation and describes the imbalance in our internal state, such as when we physiologically feel “off”

or are experiencing sensory overload in a busy environment. In addition, dysregulation can be used to describe our emotions and behavior, such as when we aren’t able to manage our feelings and react with behavior that doesn’t serve us well.

When we are dysregulated, our nervous system is often flooded with stress hormones that affect our brain and body and interfere with our well being.





Listen to Leah Kuypers talk about regulation.

SELF-REGULATION AND CO-REGULATION

We can regulate in one of two ways: self-regulation or co-regulation.

Self-regulation is independently managing feelings and states to attain goals (whether personal, social, or academic/professional) to meet the demands of our situation and support a sense of well-being.

Co-regulation is the process of connecting, or being attuned, with a social partner for support in attaining goals, meeting demands, and finding a sense of well-being. Co-regulation is something we can both provide as well as receive. To understand the difference, let's consider the following example:

A learner in the classroom is feeling frustrated trying to solve a math equation.



SELF-REGULATION

Arjun independently works through his feelings of frustration and finds a strategy (commonly referred to as “regulation tool”) that allows him to complete the equation. He uses positive self-talk (such as saying to himself, “I can do this,” or “I’m going to take some deep breaths and try again”) to guide him through the feelings and become able to refocus.



CO-REGULATION

Daniella raises her hand and, with a heavy sigh, shares her frustration with her teacher, “I don’t get this.” The teacher, attuned to Daniella’s feelings, supports her well-being by offering encouragement and providing further teaching to help clear up any confusion.



Listen to Leah Kuypers talk about the difference between self-regulation vs. co-regulation.

As our metacognitive thinking skills develop, we become more skilled at self-regulation, but even as adults we co-regulate.

Have you ever vented to a colleague about a work situation that is frustrating you or leaned on a loved one for a hug and pep talk when you’re feeling sad? We all need co-regulation with and from others for support.

EXPECT DYSREGULATION

As we build regulation competencies within ourselves and our learners, it’s important to keep in mind that no one regulates perfectly. All of us, from adults with years of experience regulating to preschoolers who are just learning to put language to feelings, will inevitably have times when we struggle to regulate. For example, who hasn’t

stayed up way too late watching a movie when you know you need to wake up early, had your anxiety and/or stress impact your productivity at work by ruminating on a problem, or sent an email in the heat of the moment instead of waiting to push “send.”

Dysregulation is a fact of life, and we can all expect it to happen.

Part of growing our capacity to regulate is finding ways to move on when we don’t regulate well and regret our behavior. Moving on might look like:

- Taking responsibility.
- Forgiving oneself (we all make mistakes).

- Repairing or restoring relationships.
- Planning for next time, which can involve asking for help.

As we build our emotional awareness and regulation skills, we gain a deeper understanding of what is happening in the moments when our regulation is not quite working for us. This awareness helps us grow in our regulation, and move on with more ease. Make sure to give yourself grace, as well as your learners, when dysregulation occurs—it is expected!

MYTH: Regulation looks like a “calm” body.

REALITY: Regulation can take many forms and takes into account our situation, task, job, and goals. Regulation might look like someone pumping themselves up for a big event, such as Michael Phelps swinging his arms and hitting his shoulder before a race. Regulation is controlling our impulse to act upon a triggering event and taking a second to think through our options before reacting. There is no one way that regulation looks!

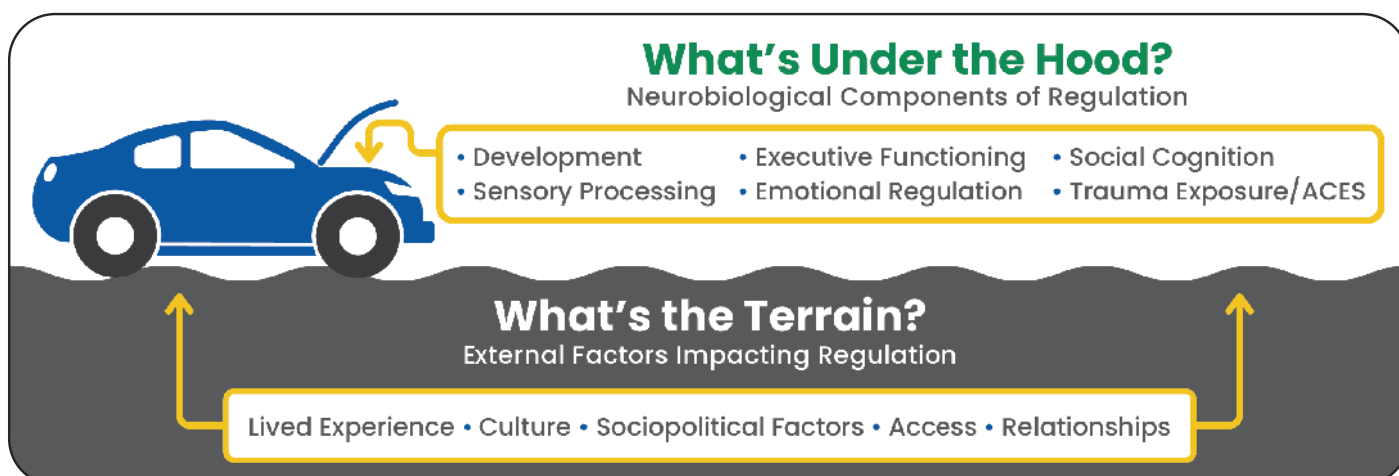


WHY DOES REGULATION MATTER?

Your ability to regulate your emotional, physical, and energetic state is critical for being able to work toward personal goals. Regulation is key to having fun, completing tasks, working effectively on a team, maintaining healthy and meaningful

relationships, achieving academically and in your career, navigating the community, and having an overall sense of well-being. It plays a huge role in finding success in school and in life.

FACTORS IMPACTING REGULATION



THE UNDERLYING FACTORS IMPACTING REGULATION

I've found that asking probing questions has helped me reframe how we should think about behavior. Looking under the hood of our learners can demystify some of their puzzling, dysregulated behaviors as well as inform the development of focused interventions, and can lead us to take actions that foster an environment where learners can thrive. I've witnessed many adults having a lightbulb moment when I talk to them about the sensory needs of a learner, allowing them a unique perspective on how the learner's sensory needs drive their behavior. When those needs aren't considered, many learners find less adaptive ways to get their sensory needs met that can appear as disruptive behavior to an untrained eye.

Developmental Nature of Regulation Strategies

Taking a closer look at the developmental nature of regulation strategies can also help us make more sense of behavior. Regulation is developmental, like learning to communicate. Some learners are neurobiologically wired to develop regulation competencies at a different rate than others. Regulation development does not necessarily correlate with a learner's age, intellect, or verbal abilities.

The Impact of Lived Experiences on Regulation

Each learner also experiences an external terrain that potentially impacts their regulation. If we

view learners through a narrow lens, focusing on their behavior or their disabilities, we only see a small piece of their story. We can miss not only the “why” behind a learner's social and emotional development but also their strengths and assets.

Rather than assume our good intentions will help all learners regardless of the terrain they've experienced, we can seek to understand their past and current experiences within settings in which they have spent time. These might include alternative school placements or detention centers, as well as a classroom, child-care program, or home. For example, a learner who has been kicked out of multiple schools may feel jaded and distrustful of staff in their educational setting, putting up a protective barrier that may come across as disinterested or defensive. Understanding a learner's past can inform and guide our instruction and interventions, creating a smoother terrain going forward.

For decades we have focused on curbing behavior, perceiving learners with “challenging behavior” through a deficit lens. We need to shift our focus to developing regulation abilities, integrating strengths and lived experiences, and building a foundational skill set that will support a learner's well-being for a lifetime. To foster regulation for all, we must recognize that some of the practices and systems that we have accepted as normal and necessary have disadvantaged and even harmed some of our learners. ■

While working in public schools as an occupational therapist and autism resource specialist, Leah Kuypers encountered learners of all ages with diverse needs. Recognizing that difficulties with regulation skills often had a significant impact on learners' functioning and overall well-being, Kuypers created The Zones of Regulation, a systematic and practical approach to fostering regulation skills. The first edition book, published in 2011 has sold more than 300,000 copies around the world.

The Zones of Regulation Digital Curriculum, released in July 2024, has already been implemented in 40 countries. The Zones team also trained more than 8,000 educators and practitioners worldwide in 2024 alone.

For more information about The Zones of Regulation, visit zonesofregulation.com.

