The Self-Reg early childhood educator

We are in the midst of a paradigm-revolution in the science of early child development. To speak of a ‘paradigm-revolution’ signifies that we are not dealing with yet another ‘shift’ in the behaviourist-cognitive pendulum, or yet another method for managing difficult children. Instead, we are presented with a new understanding of the meaning of a child’s behaviour, and thus, the need for early childhood educators (ECEs) who have been trained in Self-Reg.

The starting point for this paradigm-revolution is the idea of ‘secondary altriciality’, which dates back to the middle of the 20th century. The thinking here is that all babies are, in some sense, born ‘prematurely’ and require extensive caregiving in the early months of life, when they are undergoing a massive burst of synaptic growth and sculpting. In essence, the baby transitions from an ‘internal’ to an ‘external’ womb. The safer and more secure the ‘foetus’ feels throughout, the more robust his or her capacity to deal with stress.

The stresses a foetus must contend with come in utero — for example, chemicals, noise, infection, maternal stress. But the baby undergoes a quantum leap in the
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stresses he or she must cope with at birth: internal stresses (e.g. breathing, digestion, elimination) and external stresses (e.g. noise, lights, being pricked and probed, ambient temperature).

A baby has limited behavioural repertoire for dealing with stress. They might turn away from a loud noise or bright lights, shut down, and, of course, emit an ear-piercing shriek for help. How that cry for help is met—and whether that cry is met—is critical.

In essence, one umbilical cord is replaced by another: a ‘wireless’ connection between infant and caregiver that is maintained by shared gaze, touch, vocalisations. The caregiver must identify and reduce stresses that the baby cannot do for themself. This wireless connection is referred to as the 'Interbrain', and a child's need for this continues for a very long time. It amounts to the defining feature of the paradigm-revolution: the idea that the dyad, not an isolated child, is the fundamental unit of development. Which brings us to the pivotal role of the Self-Reg ECE.

Over the years, we have observed children who were insecurely attached in the early years of life, but who, through the care they received at preschool, became securely attached. And we have seen the opposite: children who were securely attached before they entered preschool but then became disorganised, avoidant, explosive or unresponsive.

There are different reasons why the latter occurs, but what they all have in common is a surge in stress-load. It might be because of the nature of the environment; being torn away from the ‘burrow’ they have at home; the stress of other children; the stress of an overly demanding day; the stress of a new Interbrain who doesn’t have the resources to deal with the child’s needs; or who lacks the parent’s knowledge about the child’s sensory profile; or, in some cases, who believes that children need to develop self-control for their own good.

To be a Self-Reg ECE is, first and foremost, to understand the fundamental difference between misbehaviour and stress-behaviour; know how to read the signs of each; and be able to tailor their interactions with the child accordingly. But this is just the start of what it means to be a Self-Reg ECE; for, as is the case with all paradigm-revolutions, some of our most fundamental concepts need to be reframed.

This begins with the classic distinction between ‘difficult’ and ‘easy’ babies. According to Self-Reg, there is no such thing as a ‘difficult baby’, any more than there is such a thing as a ‘bad kid’. The baby who is irritable, has poor rhythmicity, is avoidant and difficult to soothe, is telling us that he or she is over-stressed; what is ‘difficult’ here is figuring out what those stresses might be.

Just as temperament needs to be reframed, so too does attachment. In addition to well-known ‘attachment terminology’, we need to further distinguish between fragile and robust forms of secure attachment. A significant aspect of a child’s development involves broadening their range of Interbrain relationships; for example, with other adults; early educators and primary school teachers; and, of course, peers. A fragile, securely attached child can develop a ‘school-based attachment disorder’, which in turn can have a dramatic impact on the child’s relationship with his or her primary caregivers.

All of the core concepts in child development need to be reframed as a result of this paradigm-revolution: for example, personality, intelligence, motivation, morality, rationality. But the starting point is to reframe what we understand by self-regulation; or rather, to return to the original, psychophysiological definition of self-regulation, which refers to how we respond to and manage stress. That is, self-regulation is not some sort of normative skill that the child must acquire. Rather, the important point here is to distinguish between instinctive and mindful modes of self-regulation.

For example, shutting down is an effective way to block out stress, but it also blocks out the interactive experiences essential for social and emotional development. Hence this mode of self-regulation is said to be maladaptive insofar as it creates greater stresses down the road. But how can we explain this to a young child with limited linguistic comprehension?

The answer is that a child can only develop mindful modes of self-regulation if they have first experienced calmness. And a child can only experience calmness when they feel safe and secure. The understanding we are referring to here is embodied—quite literally wired into their limbic system. Even more remarkable is that there does not appear to be an age at which this ‘knowledge’ cannot be acquired.

The Self-Reg ECE not only understands all of the above, but most important of all, knows how it applies to themselves. Understanding of mindful self-regulation has to be embodied before it can become meta-cognitive. Children instantly recognise when this is the case, and respond accordingly: by feeling calm. With this as their foundation, they are poised to thrive on the many challenges that schooling presents.

Dr Stuart Shanker
The MEHRIT Centre, www.self-reg.ca

Dr Stuart Shanker was an International Keynote Speaker at the 2018 ECA National Conference. He delivered the Keynote Address, The paramount importance of early childhood educators, and the Keynote Workshop, Self-regulation and externalising and internalising anxiety behaviours.