



# Co-Regulation: *Creating Opportunities within Natural Environments and Routines*

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## Part Two of a Two-Part Article

In a part one of this article, I discussed the idea of co-regulation as the basis of all social interaction. In this article I will outline some ways to create opportunities for co-regulation in everyday activities and routines across the home and school environments.

As a brief review, co-regulation simply means that we are acting contingently with another person moment to moment; that is, acting towards and responding to each other in reciprocal fashion, with neither partner controlling the other. Co-regulation first develops within movement patterns (e.g., adjusting one's rate of walking to coincide with the walking pattern of one's partner). Later, we see co-regulation occur in the form of a dynamic conversation between partners. Therefore, when beginning to offer children opportunities to engage in co-regulatory patterns, it is best to focus on movement first, since this is the way in which co-regulation typically develops. In addition, we need to offer children authentic reasons to coordinate their actions with ours. This can best be done by creating roles in naturally-occurring routines in which the child can be competent, and then slowing down our own pace in order to allow him or her time to assume those roles independently. Here are some specific examples:

**1. Cooperative clean up.** Very often we work hard to get children to clean up on their own, viewing this task as an important step towards independence. By viewing a clean-up task through a different lens, however, we can reshape it so as to create an opportunity for co-regulation. Imagine this: Instead of asking your child to put items away on his or her own, create an "assembly line" and complete the job as a team. You may say to your child, "I have an idea! Let's clean up together. I will hand you the toy, and you can put it in its box." Then, hand the child the item, be it a block, book, or puzzle piece, so that he or she puts it in its place. This pattern can easily be generalized to many household routines—for example—to putting magazines into the recycling bin; moving groceries from the table to the refrigerator; and putting clothing items

into the washing machine. The possibilities are endless once we start looking for them! At school, children can similarly work together to clean up toys, books, art materials, or paper goods after snack. To introduce this, a teacher might say, "I'd like for you to work as a team. Johnny you can hand the books to Annie one at a time, and Annie you can put the books back on the shelf."

*Things to keep in mind for this activity model:* Process is always more important than product! Therefore, in order to set everyone up for success, start small. This means, instead of cleaning up many items all at once, start with a plan to target just five or six items at a time. If this amount is successful and the child is ready to keep going, then add more. If not, at least you are ensuring that the interaction ends on a positive note. This is important because positive memories motivate us to try again another day.

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Also, when considering which role to assume yourself and which to assign to the child, consider what will lead to success. Ask yourself the question: In which role do I think the child will be most competent? Then, begin with that one.

**2. Create together.** This next idea can be applied to any venture where something is created. For example, preparing meals or snacks, cooking or baking, and completing art projects are all opportunities for you to carve out shared roles. Here is a specific example: Imagine it is a weekend morning and you have some time to make pancakes. Mindfully consider

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the processes involved in the activity to determine ways to provide opportunities for co-regulation. For example, go to the refrigerator and pull the door open as a team. Next, hand your child the milk, so that he or she can put it on the counter. Repeat this routine with the rest of the ingredients. Then, go to the cabinet and various places in the kitchen together to get the utensils needed, working as a team as previously noted to move the items to your work space. As you start to actually make the pancakes, it will be important to keep only the items that you need at any given moment in front of you, and to move the others off to the side. This will help your child know what to attend to, and minimize potential distractions. Work as a team to add ingredients into the bowl. For example, you can invite your child to hold the measuring cup or spoon as you pour in the liquid; once completed, you can guide him or her to pour it into the bowl. Or, let your child know that you need his or her help holding the bowl in place while you stir, or vice versa.

Ways to transfer these ideas to an art project at home or at school might be as follows: take out the art materials together as outlined above; create complementary roles of cutting and gluing (e.g., you cut an item and then hand it to the child while inviting him or her to glue it in place); or hold a paper in place while the child cuts. The idea here is to constantly create complementary roles for you and the child by reshaping tasks that you would ordinarily perform on your own into two-person activities. Then, assign your child a role that you are confident is within his or her ability. Although your child may be able to complete some of these activities, independently (or is working towards the goal of independence in other contexts), the point of these types of activities is instead to establish co-regulation by building the child's competence in working cooperatively with someone else. This is a different skill, but one that is just as important, especially for children with ASD.

*Things to keep in mind for this activity model:* Because you are continuing to focus on process, you will likely need to slow your pace. Be sure to try these things out at a time when you are not in a hurry. Feeling rushed leads to stress and worry, and this will likely spill over to the child. It is hard to feel successful and competent—or to build positive memories—when we are stressed!

**3. Engage in moving tasks together.** Anytime we need to move something that is a little bit heavy, large, or awkwardly shaped,

we are presented with an opportunity for teamwork and further practice in co-regulation. Here's a specific example: Imagine that you have just returned from grocery shopping and have to bring your shopping bags into the house. Instead of carrying each one on your own, invite your child to carry each with you by saying, "Let's carry this together. I'll take this handle and you can take that handle." Reusable grocery bags are great for this activity, and this activity offers children the opportunity to practice walking at the same pace as another person. The bag, or other item in the middle, serves as a scaffold to keep you together, as well as a source of continuous feedback to help the child gauge when he or she is with the other person, and when he or she is not. As an added bonus, the child learns that in order to get the bag to where it needs to go, togetherness and teamwork (i.e., *co-regulation!*) are needed. This type of side-by-side movement can be transferred to other items such as carrying recycling bins, trash barrels, bikes (you take one handlebar and the child takes the other), furniture such as desks, tables, or chairs, and laundry baskets. Within a school setting, teachers can be mindful to have two children move or carry items together instead of asking one student to do it alone. Another bonus: These activities provide great opportunities for peer interaction.

*Things to keep in mind for this activity model:* If at any point your child lets go of the item or stops in place, be sure that you stop too. We want to powerfully communicate that his or her participation is needed, and we cannot do the job alone. Give the child a few moments to notice that you are waiting, and see if he or she resumes the role independently. If the child does not notice or starts to walk away you could try using a simple declarative comment such as, "I need your help!" or "I can't do this without you." Very often these statements help the child to re-regulate to the other person.

## Final Thoughts

In this article, I have presented some starting points / ideas for how to establish co-regulatory patterns within everyday routines and activities both at home and in school. In working to establish co-regulation, it is important to note that the type of language you use is vitally important. For example, using highly controlling, imperative language forms such as questions or commands is inconsistent with co-regulation

where the goal is cooperation and mutuality. What is recommended is the use of declarative language; that is, simple language input that invites experience-sharing without compelling or requiring a response. [See, “The Critical Importance of Using Declarative Language with Children on the Autism Spectrum” from the winter 2010 issue of ASQ, available online at: [www.ASQuarterly.com](http://www.ASQuarterly.com)].

The types of co-regulatory activities discussed in this article, paired with the use of experience-sharing communication, help children learn to simply *be* with another person on a very basic, interactive level. Needless to say, given the challenges of ASD, this is a very important goal. Moreover, the positive memories that ensue from successful co-regulatory experiences will likely drive the child—in true success-breeds-success fashion—to come back for more!! 🎉

## Bio

Linda Murphy, M.S., CCC-SLP has been a speech language pathologist for over ten years, and a Relationship Development Intervention® (RDI®) Consultant since 2007. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics from Boston College but after working for two years with adults with ASD in supported work and residential settings, she found her true passion and pursued a Master's Degree in Speech Language Pathology from Emerson College. She added RDI® to her practice in order to serve families of individuals with ASD in more effective and meaningful ways. Linda has a private practice in Beverly, Massachusetts that offers services including speech language therapy, communication assessments, school consultations, professional trainings, social pragmatics groups, and RDI®. Her website is [www.peer-projects.com](http://www.peer-projects.com) and she can be reached at [linda\\_murphy@peer-projects.com](mailto:linda_murphy@peer-projects.com).

