

Helping Children to Feel Safe When Their Classroom Re-Opens: A Tipsheet for Teachers

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We have all been in semi-isolation for many weeks. Reopening will have some similarities to starting a new year with a new group. What will the children in your classroom need from you and from the environment when they come back to their classrooms?

They need their adults to be steady and reassuring.

What are your own stress signals? Does your heart start to race or your breathing change? You can help children to feel secure by recognizing your own signals of stress and finding a way to pause rather than react. Take a breath, shake your hands out, stretch; whatever small thing you can do in the moment that will lessen those neurobiological stress responses and start to restore your calm. After a moment you might realize that you don't need to react strongly if two children share a toy, or if a child or adult coughs, etc. That pause will allow you to observe yourself, observe the situation, and decide whether to respond and how.

They need to feel safe.

Co-regulation is a shared state of calmness. It occurs when a caregiver helps another to regulate their stress level through their communication and composure. Children feel safe when they get the co-regulation they need from the adults around them. Co-regulation is the basis of self-regulation and applies to each individual child as well as to the group. To co-regulate and cue safety in the classroom, adults can:



Create Safety

- Simplify your language.
- Attune yourself to their emotional state.
- Follow their lead. Sometimes this requires waiting and patience.
- Engage them with a tone of voice that cues safety.
- Take your time and move slowly. Make no sudden or sharp movements.
- Yield to and trust in their best intentions.

Adapted from *Self-Reg Schools: A Handbook for Educators*

Simplify your language, your approach, and your curriculum. Most children haven't needed to separate from their parents, listen to directions given to a group, or read the social cues of people outside of their families for several weeks. A "back to basics" approach might support the children the most: process-based artwork, block play, books at or below their usual level.

Attune yourself to their emotions and their needs. Attune means *to make responsive or be receptive*. Just as you might need to make a physical scan of children as they come in to assess signs of illness, scan them for their emotional state so that you can respond to their needs. It also means *harmonize*. Based on your knowledge of each child and of the group, how can you harmonize with them to promote a feeling of security?

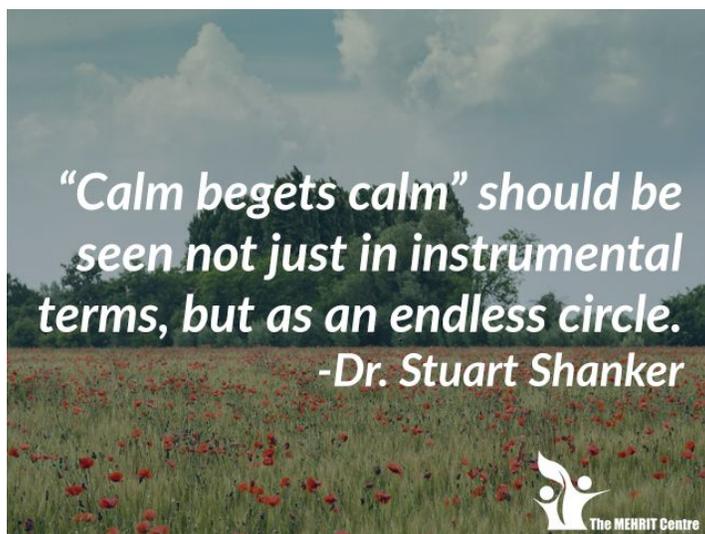
Follow their lead. Do they want you to be close or far, use more words or fewer? Be as patient as you can to discover, through observation and conversation, what they might need.

Engage them with a tone of voice that cues safety. Using a slower voice, a lower pitch, and speaking directly rather than from across the room creates a feeling of calm and allows a child to connect with you. That connection, or co-regulation, creates safety.

Take your time. Your physical movements and nonverbal cues convey your emotions, just as your voice does. If there is no real reason to hurry, take your time. If there is a time element involved, such as new rules about having to be at the playground at a certain time, find a way to move, and help the children move, in a way that is still relaxed. It will keep your own stress levels down as well as the children's.

Yield to and trust in their best intentions. When a child has behaviors that are difficult for those around them it is rarely intentional. What many characterize as *misbehavior* is usually *stress behavior*. When our energy is being burned due to stress there is little left over for learning. Recognize your own stress reactions and pause. Understand that children are doing their best in this new situation, as we all are.

The above isn't very different from how good teachers teach pre-Covid 19. These concepts apply to teachers as well as to children. Safety is always the best curriculum because it is when we feel secure that we can connect with each other, learn best, challenge ourselves, and be self-regulated. Safety is the first curriculum. The rest follows.



The Early Years Project supports children, infants through preschool, and their families in the Cambridge/ Somerville area, by working with the early childhood communities that care for them. We work with directors, teachers, and providers to create a welcoming and supportive environment for all children and families. For more information visit our [website](#) or [email us](#).