



Connect First.
Learn Second:

Why Co-Regulation is Your
Parenting Superpower

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Before Progress, There's Presence

As a pediatric OT (and mama of emotional kiddos myself), I've seen it time and time again: We can't make real progress on sensory regulation, fine motor milestones, or mealtime battles if a child's nervous system is dysregulated.

Before we teach new skills...

Before we expect "better behavior"...

Before we even try a new sensory tool, pencil grasp, or food strategy...

We co-regulate.

Because emotionally resilient kids don't just learn through reward charts or routines—they learn through connection. Through watching, feeling, and borrowing our calm.

Here are 8 things parents of emotionally strong, flexible, and confident kids consistently do (and don't worry—they're small, doable shifts, not some Pinterest-perfect ideal):

Validate feelings—even the ones that feel inconvenient

Instead of “You’re fine,” try: “You’re really mad right now. I’m here.”

Validation doesn’t mean agreement—it means attunement.

Co-regulate before you correct

When a child is melting down, reasoning won’t land. First, match their nervous system with calm presence. Deep breaths, gentle tone, soft eyes. That’s the reset they need.

Set boundaries with connection

“You’re allowed to feel angry. You’re not allowed to hit.”

OT tip: predictable boundaries support a child’s sensory and emotional safety.

Model what emotional regulation looks like

Instead of stuffing your own big feelings or snapping, narrate:

“I’m feeling frustrated, so I’m going to take a breath before I respond.”

That’s powerful learning right there.

Prioritize sensory safety

Before transitions, before seated tasks, before social moments—check in: Is my child regulated?

If not, a movement break or sensory input (like deep pressure or proprioception) may be the key.

Support independence with scaffolding

Let your child try first—but be ready to coach through struggles. “You’re stuck? Let’s figure it out together.”

Reinforce effort and regulation—not just outcomes

Instead of “Good job eating all your broccoli,” try:

“You listened to your body and gave it a try. That took courage!”

Make space for connection, not correction

Sometimes, a child just needs to feel safe with you. Create cozy check-in moments—snuggle time, silly time, shared play. These moments build the emotional muscle for regulation.

The bottom line...

Your child’s regulation begins with your regulation.

You don’t need to be perfect—you just need to be present enough.

Need more support on your journey?

Come check out my 1:1 mama coaching calls and other resources, created for parents like you who are ready to feel more confident, less overwhelmed, and totally seen.

www.thrivethroughplayot.com