



# The Power of Self-Reg for Parents and Their Children

From Dr. Stuart Shanker

Breakout Discussion Questions

## The Power of Self-Reg

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker explains that when children are highly stressed, or in fight or flight, they shift from social or learning brain to survival brain. This makes it harder for them to think, make decisions, understand others and express themselves.”*

Think about situations when you were highly stressed. Consider how stress affected your behavior or communication.

- How did it affect your ability to listen to and understand someone else?
  - How might you respond to children’s behavior differently if you realized that they were in survival brain rather than learning/social brain?
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- **Question 2:** *“The limbic system is the brain’s home base for strong emotions like love, fear, shame and anger. Dr. Shanker writes, “When we can calm that [primitive limbic] response, we begin to bring all the other self-regulation processes into sync.”*
    - What could parents do to help calm a limbic response in a child?

## Self-Regulation versus Self-Control

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker explains that as stress drains a child’s fuel tank, “they rely on adrenaline and cortisol to keep themselves going. This is why they become hyper or manic.”*

Consider how this idea changes your understanding of why children who really need to go to bed, or switch to a quieter activity, often seem unwilling or unable to do so.

- How can we employ self-regulation strategies to help children in this type of hyper state?
- **Question 2:** *“Dr. Shanker emphasizes the importance of reframing children’s behavior to answer the question, “Why am I seeing this behavior now?” in the following quote: “Whatever the circumstances, reframing your child’s behavior instantly changes the dynamic and opens the way for greater understanding and lasting change.”*

Try to think of a recent experience where a child’s (or adult’s) behavior or words seemed out of character or an overreaction to the situation.

- How could you reframe that behavior in terms of the question, “Why am I seeing this behavior now?”
- How could reframing give you a more sympathetic view of that person’s behavior?

## The Five Domain Model for Self-Reg

- **Question 1:** *“A child’s in distress, we feel an almost reflexive need to try to reason it away. The problem is that the systems in the brain that he would need to process well-intentioned reason go off-line when he’s hyperaroused.”*

Think of when you have experienced or observed situations where adults tried to reason with an upset child. Then think of a situation where adults did not try to reason, but instead worked to comfort and calm the child.

- How did the child respond in each case?
- How did the child’s responses affect the adult?

## The Biological Domain - Eat, Play and Sleep

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker discusses sensory issues that can cause stress in the biological domain for many children: “They aren’t just ‘sensitive to’ but are drained by different kinds of stimuli including light, sound, smell and touch.”*

Think about sensory stressors that affected you as a child or as an adult, or that have affected your child.

- What was the impact of these stressors on your (or your child’s) behavior and mood?
- Were adults able to identify and reduce those stressors?
- How were you (or your child) affected when sensory stress was reduced?

## The Emotion Domain - The Monster in the Attic

- **Question 1:** *“Every parent I’ve ever talked with has realized, even if only intuitively, that resilience lies not in avoiding or repression but in confronting and dealing with strong emotions.”*
  - How does this statement resonate with your own beliefs and experiences?
  - What do you find challenging about dealing with your children’s strong emotions?

## The Cognitive Domain - Calm, Alert, and Learning

- **Question 1:** *“Heightened stress interferes with sensory awareness and other aspects of cognition: “If he has to spend too much energy trying to sit still, inhibit an impulse, or make sense of what he’s seeing, or hearing, there may not be enough left to work through a problem step by step.”*

Think about children you have known who had trouble sitting still (or even yourself).

- What have you seen in their behavior that shows they are burning energy?
- What signs have you seen that their energy is becoming depleted?

- **Question 2:** *“Dr. Shanker says that, in his experience, when you ask children who are in a low- energy/high-tension state what they are feeling in their body, they will usually answer, “nothing.” However, once they begin to calm down, they suddenly report something like a knot in their stomach that’s “been there forever.”*

Think about the idea of awareness of arousal states (energy and tension).

- Are you always aware of your inner state?
- In your experience, how aware are children of how they feel inside?
- Can you think of ways to talk to young children about these inner feelings?

## **The Social Domain - A New Lens for Looking at Social Development**

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker says that social engagement is a human evolutionary adaptation for dealing with threat.*

Think about a time when your child sought out engagement with you in response to a feeling of threat (minor or major).

- Discuss how you responded to them and the effect on your child.
- **Question 2:** *“Dr. Shanker notes that a critical function of the interbrain is to turn off the brain’s alarm system when it detects apparent (or real) social threats.”*

Think about strategies you have used to help your child feel less alarmed in social situations.

- Which strategies were successful and which ones didn’t work so well?

## The Prosocial Domain - Empathy and the Better Self

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker says that when children do something antisocial, while they do need to be told that what they did was wrong, there is no rush to talk about what happened. “Sometimes you have to wait twenty-four hours before the child is ready.”*

Often, however, our instinct as parents is to respond immediately and decisively. Discuss this dilemma.

- Why do we feel such a strong need to respond swiftly (and firmly) to antisocial behavior?
  - Why would a child be more “ready” to talk about it the next day?
  - What might be the benefits to parents in waiting until the next day to talk about what happened?
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- **Question 2:** *“The crux of Self-Reg is that we “are social beings and to be such is to be born with a brain that demands empathy... a child develops empathy by experiencing empathy.”*

Think about your feelings of empathy towards your children as babies.

- What helped you, or made you feel empathy?
- Were there times when it was harder to feel empathy? Why?

## The Power and Perils of Adolescence

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker points out that, due to a period of rapid brain development in adolescence, teens have a heightened stress alarm system and increased sensitivity to “negative affect cues.” As a result “the teen’s amygdala is like a smoke alarm that goes off when all you’re doing is boiling water.”*

Think back to your teen years.

- Can you recall ways in which your stress alarm was heightened?
  - Did you have a tendency to interpret people’s words, tone of voice or facial expression negatively?
  - What kind of support would you have wanted from your parents and teachers?
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- **Question 2:** *“The challenge for parents comes in stepping up parental guidance as needed to help the teen safely navigate today’s world, while stepping back enough to let the adolescent’s natural developmental processes progress...”*

Think about this statement in light of what we hear about helicopter parents who are over-involved in the lives of older teenagers and, at the other end of the spectrum, parents who throw up their hands and say, “Well, he’s a teenager now. He’s going to do what he wants. What can I do about it?”

- Discuss how these contrasting approaches to parenting might disrupt the natural course of adolescent development.
- Have you known parents who seemed to find ways to strike the balance that Dr. Shanker is talking about?

## More: Desire, Dopamine, and the Surprising Biology of Boredom (the Reward System)

- **Question 1:** *“Dr. Shanker explains that problems associated with overstimulation, super stimulants, and addictions to junk food and video games are related to disruptions of the brain’s neurochemical reward and stress response systems. Thus, we need to help children tune in to their internal cues about their physical and emotional states. “It’s a case of getting kids to recognize how they feel when they do something that reduces the tension and tops up their energy. Once their ERS [emergency response system} goes back on standby, cravings quickly change.”*
  - How can parents help children develop this type of awareness? What might we do at various stages of development – baby/toddler, preschool, school-age, teen?
  - Do you think there might be a balance point between allowing children to enjoy activities and foods that their friends are most likely allowed to enjoy, and preventing children from going overboard?

## Parents Under Pressure: Where Do We Go from Here?

- **Question 1:** *“The first of Dr. Shanker’s ten ways to develop the habit of Self-Reg in parenting is to look for the often subtle patterns in children’s behavior and manner that suggest they are becoming over-aroused due to stress. “We have to learn when they are telling us, through their body and their speech, that their stress is too great.”*

Sometimes it is relatively easy to tell if a child is overstressed. At other times, as Dr. Shanker says, the signs can be very subtle.

- Share some of the more subtle signs of stress that you have seen in your own children.
  - How easy do you find it to tell the difference between stress behavior and misbehavior?
  - Were there times when you were able to read the signs of stress in retrospect, rather than in the moment?
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- **Question 2:** *“Dr. Shanker offers five ways for parents to practice self-care in order to be happier and more confident in their parenting. You have probably heard other experts saying that parents should take care of themselves.*
- Does Self-Reg give you a new way of thinking about parental self-care? How so?
  - How can you apply what you’ve learned about stress, recovery and restoration of energy to help yourself to become a more relaxed and confident parent?