

The Sexual Risk Avoidance National Evaluation: Co-Regulation from the Perspective of Youth

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Self-regulation is a set of skills that a person develops to manage their thoughts and feelings to support tasks such as setting goals, solving problems, and making decisions (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017). Adults can support the development of youth’s self-regulation skills through a process called co-regulation. Co-regulation integrates three key types of support from adults: (1) providing warm, responsive relationships; (2) creating a safe, supportive environment and positive program climate; and (3) coaching and modeling self-regulation skills. It is particularly important to provide youth with co-regulation support to help them develop self-regulation skills during adolescence, a critical stage in development (Murray and Rosanbalm 2017). This brief highlights how youth experienced Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) programming when facilitators incorporated co-regulation strategies.

The Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation (SRAENE) Co-Regulation Implementation Study tested how facilitators’ use of co-regulation strategies influenced their relationship with youth and how changes in these relationships influenced youth’s engagement with SRAE program content. SRAE facilitators from nine grant recipients teaching the Love Notes curriculum attended training in three co-regulation strategies: welcoming, praise, and breath to focus (Table 1). As part of the Co-Regulation Implementation Study, the study team conducted 16 focus groups with 83 youth to understand how they experienced SRAE programming. Collecting information on youth’s perspectives is an important step to inform planning and service delivery as well as future evaluations.

Table 1. Co-regulation strategies incorporated by facilitators

Strategy	Description
Welcoming	The facilitator gives youth a worksheet (known as sheet) which youth use to describe how they want the facilitator to interact with them. The facilitator greets each youth personally at each workshop (known as greet). The facilitator checks in with a few youth one-on-one during or after each session to make an individual connection (known as meet).
Praise	<i>Two-part verbal praise:</i> The facilitator provides verbal praise that is personal (that is, using the student’s name) and focuses on a specific behavior or effort. <i>Four-part written praise:</i> The facilitator writes students a note that is personal, praises a specific behavior or effort, focuses on the accomplishment and not natural ability, and expresses the value of the demonstrated behavior or effort to the classroom or the community.
Breath to focus	The facilitator guides youth to use deep breaths to refocus during transitions or times of intense emotion. The facilitator authentically models the exercise for the youth by deliberately inhaling and exhaling at planned times or as needed.

Youth voice on strategy implementation

In the focus groups, youth reported specifically how the three strategies helped foster trusted relationships with their facilitators, create a positive classroom environment, develop their own self-regulation skills, and generate deeper engagement in SRAE program content.

Welcoming. The welcoming strategy offered a way to build relationships and create a positive classroom environment by providing opportunities for facilitators to interact with youth personally and learn about them as individuals. The strategy was well-received and students reported that individual relationship-building was meaningful and helped strengthen the bonds they felt with their facilitators. When facilitators greeted youth at the door (greet) or took time for direct conversation (through meets), they engaged in one-on-one interactions that made youth feel their facilitators cared about them and their lives outside the classroom. One youth also noted how the greet part of the welcoming strategy created a positive environment: “When we enter the classroom, [and the facilitator usually gives me] a handshake or a hug. . .it’s a great experience. It makes my day.”

Positive praise. The praise strategy helped create a supportive environment in the classroom by acknowledging youth’s contributions. Youth responded positively to praise. When describing the mood in the classroom, youth often connected the verbal and written praise they received to that mood. For example, one youth reported how she felt when receiving verbal praise. “Really, really good. It feels good. It kind of made this like one of my favorite classes.” Similarly, students were emotionally moved by written praise notes. One student said, “I haven’t really had anyone ever thank me for stuff like that before.” Praise can offer an opportunity to create a strong connection and strengthen the facilitator-youth relationship that leads to higher engagement and uptake of self-regulation skills.

Praise can also help reinforce youth’s use of self-regulation skills. Facilitators looked for opportunities to praise youth when they specifically practiced self-regulation, for instance practicing self-soothing techniques or removing distractions from their environment. Many facilitators used written praise to acknowledge this. One student stated “If you did something positive ... they’ll give you a note praising you.” By acknowledging youth through the co-regulation strategies, facilitators reinforced these behaviors and supported youth’s progress in developing self-regulation skills.

Breath to focus. The breath to focus strategy helped students develop a specific skill for self-regulating their emotions. Taking deep breaths helped regulate stress and remove distractions. Breath to focus sometimes required time and practice for youth to be receptive to the strategy. Youth frequently reported that facilitators used breath to focus to set up a calm and emotionally safe environment for lessons. Youth described how facilitators used it during difficult content, when youth had a hard time settling down, and when starting class. Some youth discussed the role that breathing exercises played in their engagement with the SRAE program and in the overall classroom climate. One student highlighted her positive experience with the skill and the reactions she witnessed among other students: “[breath to focus] could help you calm down a little bit... a way to help you keep a level head and keep yourself focused on the situation you’re on.”

Insights shared by youth

Youth highlighted how the program facilitators from outside the school broadly built safe environments, relationships, and engagement with SRAE content. As a result, youth were receptive to co-regulation strategies; facilitators encouraged youth to learn and use self-regulation skills. Insights from youth are critical to understanding how the actions and qualities of facilitators matter to youth’s experiences in the classroom. The study team learned about how facilitators using co-regulation strategies influenced youth’s experiences outside the classroom. These findings are particularly salient because youth reported them firsthand. Through focus groups, the study team gained insight into the influence of co-regulation strategies on youth’s handling of social and emotional challenges.

Youth said the facilitator influenced the overall tone and climate of the classroom.

Youth described positive classroom environments, which they attributed directly to their facilitator(s). For example, one student explained how the classroom’s positive mood was

“It’s a comfortable environment because not only is it just because she knows us so well, but because we know her.”

dependent on the facilitator. “Because I’ve had some pretty bad teachers in the past. And I kind of didn’t want to go to that class or just didn’t look forward to going to that class. But [my facilitator] led it in a way where I was like, ‘Oh, yay, I get to go to health class and learn about this.’” According to youth, facilitators were a critical variable in establishing an environment that fostered engagement in SRAE content.

Youth felt they had positive relationships with their facilitators.

Youth described several facilitators in a positive light and pointed to their ability to make

personal connections with youth, which led to students’ comfort in engaging more in

“The people that do participate, it’s because they actually enjoy it, and they’re understanding it. And [the facilitators] want to make others feel comfortable enough to actually try to speak up.”

classroom discussions. When facilitators established rapport, youth characterized their facilitators as trusted and nonjudgmental, offering youth the freedom to engage and speak openly about the topics taught in class. Youth highlighted the link between facilitator-youth relationships and the subsequent engagement with SRAE program content. One student described how facilitators related to youth. “It was really open, especially because the leaders were also sharing parts of their personal lives, so more people felt more open to share.” Another student added, “They want to make others feel comfortable enough to actually try to speak up.” These findings reiterated how relationship-building with youth helps facilitators act as co-regulators. As a result of these efforts, youth engage with SRAE program content.

Youth learned self-regulation skills to implement inside and outside the classroom.

Facilitators’ efforts to build a supportive environment, relationships, and engagement using the co-regulation strategies influenced what youth learned, according to youth themselves. Several youth described how the SRAE program helped them learn a variety of self-regulation skills, including goal setting, managing emotions, and making future decisions. For example, when asked about specific techniques learned in class, two

students reflected on goal setting, saying, “If we get overwhelmed doing something, then we set small goals to help reach that larger goal. Like, many steps to get to that one big step,” and “I’ve been able to distinguish what’s going to help me achieve that goal and what’s not.”

“[The class] definitely helped us understand what we want for our future. How we should plan our future, things like that.”

Youth also shared that they could use their self-regulation skills outside the classroom. “If I’m overreacting or something, I can reflect on the emotions how they taught me and know if I need to communicate them or not.” Similarly, youth reported that they were encouraged to learn and use breath to focus when facilitators modeled the skill and talked about how exercises such as breath to focus can help in self-regulating emotions or thoughts. One youth discussed her positive experience with breath to focus outside of class. “Yesterday after my game—I gave it a try. I was a little upset about it, so [breath to focus] helped me calm down. I liked it.”

Conclusion

In the Co-Regulation Implementation Study, augmenting facilitation skills through co-regulation strategies created a supportive environment and trusting relationships, which in turn influenced engagement in self-regulation skills taught in the SRAE curriculum. Youth voice was an invaluable asset for understanding participants’ experiences in the classroom and the ways that co-regulation augmented facilitators’ skills. Furthermore, focus groups highlighted the ways youth used self-regulation strategies outside the classroom. These insights would not have been captured through other methods of data collection. Given that research on the use of co-regulation in SRAE programs—and in human services programs more broadly—is limited, these experiences are important in uncovering what elements influence youth’s uptake of program content and their own self-regulation. The insights generated through youth voice are powerful in underscoring how SRAE programs strengthen skills for youth during adolescence.

References

Murray, D. W., and K. Rosanbalm. "Promoting Self-Regulation in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Practice Brief. OPRE Report 2015-82. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2017.

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