

spark*/spark*EL Backgrounder on

Calm Adults = Calm Children

In both spark* and spark*EL, we emphasize the need for adults working and interacting with the children to be calm. Why do we focus so much on that?

It's only been in the last 10 years that we've looked at the impact of other people on children's behavior. This more recent focus emphasizes the need for people within the child's life to recognize and change their own behavior in order to help improve the child's behavior.

So how does this work? Research has shown that high levels of stress and anxiety in adults dealing with children with autism result in higher frequencies of behavior problems in the children. Children with autism are often 'emotional sponges' who absorb the feelings around them regardless of whether they're directed to them or not. These emotions increase the child's state of anxiety which then jeopardize his ability to learn. They also can result in more problem behaviors and acting out by the child.

The emotional states of caregivers and children are related to each other: adult emotional state affects the child's emotional state which then increases the likelihood of problem behavior. The problem behavior may, in turn, affect the emotional state of the adults (see the diagram on the next page).

By changing the emotional state of the adults, research has shown that anxiety and problem behaviors decrease in children and adolescents with autism.

Thus, changing adult emotional states is important to decreasing anxiety in the children they work and interact with. This will reduce the likelihood of problem behaviors. We know that, when the child is calm and not experiencing anxiety or having behavior problems, he's more likely to enjoy and benefit from interactions and intervention.

What can we do to alter our emotional state when working with children with autism?

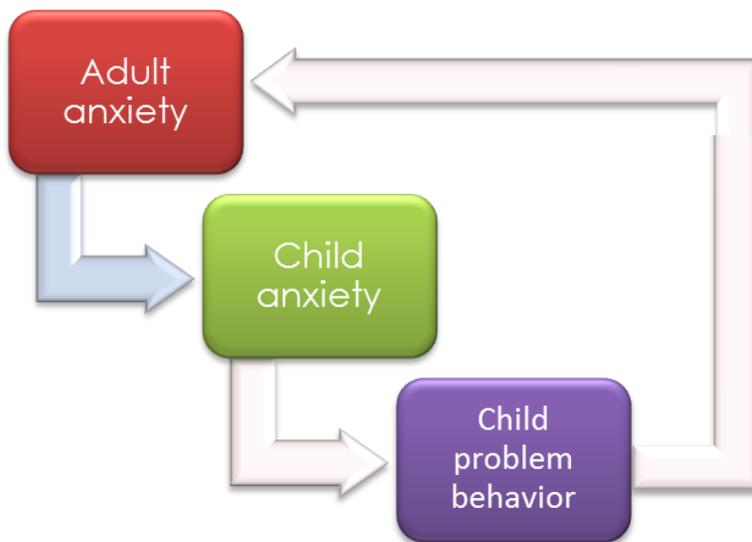


spark*, *Self-regulation Program of Awareness and Resilience in Kids.*, is an innovative evidence-based program that teaches children how to manage and regulate their behavior, thinking and emotions. **spark*EL** is spark* for Elementary-school-aged children.

Both programs are based on well-researched theory, current neurology, extensive clinical practice and **spark***-specific research.

spark* and **spark*EL** are comprehensive, practical and systematic and provides all information and resources needed to implement the program successfully.

Find out more at <http://spark-kids.ca>



What can we do?

The first and most important step in the process of regulating your state of anxiety is to become aware of it. Acknowledge your feelings. Don't be judgemental. Be mindful of your feelings and accept them as valid.

Next, remind yourself of the impact your state of stress or anxiety can have on the child. If you remain as calm and positive as possible, the child will be calmer and he'll learn more effectively.

This process is referred to as **mindful caring**. It involves nonjudgmental acceptance of your qualities and behaviors as well as those of the child. Being mindful is simply having a clear, calm mind that is focused on the present moment in an open-minded way. Mindfulness allows you to free your mind so you can notice and respond to the child

more positively. If you are calm, you're more likely to respond in a calm manner.

You should also examine your values, attributions and expectations that may skew your perceptions of the child and his behavior. By viewing the child's behavior non-judgementally, you're more likely to figure out the true source of problems. This doesn't mean you resign yourself to accepting everything as it is. It also doesn't release you from taking responsibility for guiding and directing the child.

Being a mindful carer helps you support and teach children with autism more effectively. Through improved regulation of your own emotions, you provide positive support which encourages and maintains a state of calm and greater openness to learning in the child.

How do we address adult calming in spark* and spark*EL?

Become a mindful carer by following these practices:

1. **Pay attention**—Attune yourself to the present moment. Be sensitive to the child's tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Use these cues to figure out his needs, intended meaning, thoughts and feelings.
2. **Accept the child fully** - Become aware of your expectations of the child and what values and meanings you may attribute to his behavior. Don't view him through his diagnostic label or through some sense of what you believe his intention may be.
3. **Regulate your emotions** – Take a few moments before you start working or interacting with a child. Breathe some deep, cleansing, calming breaths that let your emotions float away like logs on a stream. Regulate your emotions so that your behavior is in keeping with the values and goals for each child. This doesn't mean that negative emotions aren't felt.
4. **Be kind to yourself** – Be gentle and forgiving toward yourself. This process will take practice and patience.