



CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL REGULATION (PART 1):

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS, CAREGIVERS, AND OTHERS

The Bottom Line

Many children struggle with emotional regulation, especially during times of heightened stress. Teachers, caregivers, and others can practice emotional regulation tactics such as creating safe spaces, structured routines, and teaching children how it feels to “flip your lid”. It may be beneficial for children to recognize when they are, or are beginning to feel, dysregulated so they can form habits to support returning to their “window of tolerance.”

Maintaining skills for self-regulation has benefits beginning at an early age. Children who possess these skills as early as preschool often feel better prepared, are more likely to have higher academic success, make fewer risky decisions as adolescents, and have better health and productivity as adults.

Supporting the self-regulation of children may be difficult when the children are facing individual or community stressors. Behavioural disruptions may become more frequent and unmanageable when children experience high levels of change and stress. Children who have experienced trauma may require professional support to increase their skills in self-regulation; however, there are many tactics that can be taught and reinforced daily to support all children to understand when they are feeling dysregulated and what to do to bring themselves back to a more regulated state.

Possible Responses

General Strategies to Support the Emotional Regulation of Children

- *Supporting children in finding or creating a quiet and safe space* - either metaphorically or physically. An identified “cool-down” space away from others can be beneficial, such as a chair, a bedroom, a corner, or a tent where children can go when they are feeling dysregulated. Fidget toys and soft objects in this space can also help restore calm.
- *Structuring predictable activities for children to foster a sense of safety* - Routines, stability, and predictability have all been identified as essential to create a sense of safety, particularly for children and youth living with trauma.
- *Slowing down, taking time to pause* - Dysregulation can occur when a child feels overwhelmed, pushing them outside of their [window of tolerance](#). Supporting or re-establishing regulation can occur by slowing down, pausing, and practicing breathing exercises (or other grounding exercises) to bring them back to the present. This practice can also be useful in preventing dysregulation from occurring as frequently.

- *Taking care of a living thing together.* Showing children how to care for something may act as a positive outlet for stress and provide children with a stable sense of responsibility. Ideas include caring for a small pet, such as a hamster or a fish, or planting a small garden. This can be done in a counseling office, at home, or in the classroom as a shared project.
- *Practicing gratitude and supporting children to reframe their mindsets.* Small shifts in thinking can have powerful effects. Shifting to thinking such as: “I get to...” instead of, “I have to...” or, “This IS bad, but we can still be grateful for...”, can create a mental habit to view thoughts and emotions through a positive lens.

Strategies for Teachers

- Children may have a difficult time understanding their emotions in abstract terms. Dr. Dan Siegel coined the term “flipping your lid” - a hand gesture representing what is going on in the brain when someone is about to become emotionally dysregulated. In simple terms, the lower parts of the brain - referred to as the “downstairs brain” - become overwhelmed with emotions. If the downstairs brain is firing too many emotions, the upper parts of the brain - referred to as the “upstairs brain” - can no longer contain the emotions from firing externally. The goal of emotional regulation is to name the emotions being experienced in order to “tame” them before they become too overwhelming, causing someone to “flip their lid”. Educating children on how to recognize and state when they are about to flip their lid and need to take a pause may support the child to regulate their emotions before they become too dysregulated, and may prevent an external emotional outburst.
- Supporting children to learn a host of grounding exercises that work for them when they are feeling emotionally dysregulated. It may be beneficial to educate children about identifying their emotions and how grounding exercises can be practically applied in many settings. Being able to name the emotions they are feeling can start the process to return to their window of tolerance.
- Supporting children to build relationships, get socially engaged in meaningful ways, and share feelings with a caring friend can create a sense of connectedness, belonging, and community that are essential.
- Providing clarity of expectations and balancing responsibilities with less intense tasks can support kids to maintain and/or reclaim regulation.



Strategies for Caregivers

- Organizing child-led play as often as possible. Scheduling play breaks allows the child to get ahead of boredom, which may prevent outbursts. Providing the child with an exact time you can give them undivided attention may foster a more distraction-free environment for others in the home.
- Practicing positive attention. Noticeably praising children for attempting to self-regulate may increase their confidence and desire to behave appropriately when they begin to feel dysregulated.
- Concurrently, while big emotions warrant intervention, ignoring small negative behaviours, such as microaggressions, may show the child that they will not receive the attention they are seeking for actions resulting from a lack of self-regulation (depending on the nature and impact of the behaviour). This strategy is to be used with caution.
- Supporting children to recognize that some of their biological needs may affect their mood. If a child is feeling stressed, tired, hungry, or frustrated, this can deplete their emotional regulation resources. Supporting children to recognize when they have unmet needs may support faster stabilization and less frequent outbursts.
- If a child does flip their lid, try to avoid telling them to calm down. Telling a child or youth to calm down may cause them to be more upset and discouraged as they cannot command their emotions to calm automatically. Instead, using comforting and empathetic phrases, such as “I’m here with you”; “you are safe”; “it’s okay to cry, you will feel better soon”; “let’s take some deep breaths together”, may remind the child they are still cared for and ease their big emotions.



For original sources and documents, please visit: www.childtraumaresearch.ca

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