



CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL REGULATION (PART 2): INTERVENTION APPROACHES FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

The Bottom Line

While an event may disrupt the emotional well-being of many children, certain circumstances may be especially difficult for children who have been impacted by trauma. Evidence-based approaches to supporting emotional regulation through intervention approaches such as the Attachment, Regulation, Competency (ARC) Framework and Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT) may be beneficial in supporting children who have experienced trauma.

Emotional Regulation

In a variety of contexts, there are many things that can make children feel emotionally dysregulated. The goal is to support them to recognize when emotional dysregulation is occurring and to develop skills to support moving toward regulation.

Any event poses dysregulation risks for all children and adults; however, particular challenges may arise for children who have been impacted by traumatic experiences. These children may: have a limited vocabulary for identifying and differentiating their emotions; be disconnected from their emotional experiences; lack strategies for expressing and managing difficult or intense emotions; behave in ways that appear unpredictable and/or exaggerated relative to the social context; engage in 'unhealthy' behaviours (e.g. self-harm, aggression) in order to regain control when faced with difficult experiences and the emotions they elicit; respond with the survival tactics of 'fight', 'flight', 'freeze', or 'appease' in response to situations that may not seem dangerous; and may dissociate from the current situation.

Possible Intervention Approach: The Attachment, Regulation, Competency (ARC) Framework (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019)

The ARC framework is designed to support caregiving systems such as parents, foster parents, group care providers, teachers, and others to emphasize engagement, psychoeducation, and routine for children. One of the three domains guiding the ARC framework - self-regulation - supports caregivers and service providers to help children impacted by trauma to have success in regulating their emotions through skill in identifying, understanding, and managing internal experiences; recognizing and understanding feelings, body states, and associated thoughts and behaviours, and developing increased capacity to accept and manage physiological and emotional experiences.

Possible Responses Using the ARC Framework

- Modulation of a child or youth's current emotional state is a necessary first step before attempting to help them identify or communicate what is happening.
- Activities and strategies should correspond to the child or youth's developmental level, as opposed to their chronological age.
- Activities can be used as opportunities to get to know and understand the child.
- Keeping yourself centred and checking in with your own emotional state is important.
- Analyze and recognize where the child's energy is and where it needs to go (e.g., up if they are tired or feeling 'low', or down if they are feeling escalated).
- Reflect objectively what you are seeing and share those feelings with the child or youth (e.g., "I can see you just got really mad. Let's see if we can bring that feeling down a bit so we can talk").
- Cue the child to use skills that support regulation (e.g. breathing, counting, sitting quietly, going to their calm space, stress ball).
- Positively reinforce modulation skills (e.g., "I'm really proud of you for trying to bring down your energy to a space that feels better").
- Invite expression/communication when the child is in a more regulated state.

Many resources and activities from the ARC manual (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019) are provided publicly through the ARC website, [ARCframework.org](https://www.arcframework.org):

- [Self-care worksheet](#): This can be used between a service provider or a caregiver and a child to reflect on a situation where the child became dysregulated. It is also relevant for caregivers to reflect on their own emotional reactions to respond more sensitively to similar situations, and allows for debriefing and preparation should a comparable emotional situation arise for the child in the future.
- [Overarching goal of the week](#): This worksheet encourages children to work towards the goal of understanding when they begin to feel emotionally dysregulated, and how they can re-enter their window of tolerance.
- [Five-minute connection activities](#): This information sheet provides several basic ideas that can be done quickly and interactively to engage and connect with children.
- [Modulation activities](#): This information sheet offers ideas to support the regulation of a child or youth. Many are useful activities to try during moments of dysregulation, but may also be beneficial for daily use for consistent emotional regulation.
- [Activities guide](#): This information sheet offers multiple creative options for activities to engage and connect with a child or youth.



Possible Intervention Approach: The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT) (Perry, 2006)

The NMT approach was developed to understand the neurobiological effects of childhood trauma and appropriate interventions. The approach considers that the majority of brain organization occurs within the first four years of a child's life, developing from the lower parts of the brain (i.e., brainstem) to the higher parts of the brain (i.e., limbic system, cortical region). In seemingly 'regular' or stressful situations, the brains of children who experienced early trauma can be 'activated' and remain in lower brain levels too long. Thus, their emotional and mental maturity can become stuck at the developmental age at which they experienced the traumatic event(s). This can cause a child or youth to continuously regress in behaviour when they become emotionally dysregulated.

Possible Responses Using the NMT Approach

The “6 R’s” based from the NMT model are supportive ways that families and service providers can support children to heal from trauma and support emotional regulation.

Activities should be:

- Relational: Involve engagement and building trusting relationships with the child.
- Relevant: Based on the developmental level/age of each child.
- Repetitive: Must occur many times to truly make a difference.
- Rewarding: Should be a pleasurable experience for the child.
- Rhythmic: Should follow a strong, simple rhythm (e.g., patterned breathing or walking).
- Respectful: Should respect the child, family, culture, and life experiences.

These activities should be initiated by a safe adult, such as a caregiver, teacher, or mental health practitioner to provide a stable and healing environment for the child. Some NMT activities commonly used following the structure of the 6 R's are:

- Involvement in music; drumming
- Movement, such as walking, running, dancing, or biking; yoga
- Therapeutic massage; Reiki
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy
- Interactions with animals
- Art and drama therapy



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