



Emotional Regulation

Children of all ages deal with a lot of the same emotions that we as adults face, including anger, frustration, sadness, happiness, but often they do not have the words to talk about their feelings. Instead, children can often act out their feelings in a physical way, such as throwing a toy if they are frustrated with it, or hitting their brother or sister if they lose a game.

Emotional regulation is the ability to recognise and understand your emotions. It is also the ability to manage your behaviour and reactions to your feelings and your environment.

The ability to regulate emotions (self-regulate) means that children are able to:

- Deal with difficult emotions such as disappointment and frustration in a healthy way.
- Control their impulses, and calm themselves down after becoming excited or upset.
- Learn socially acceptable ways to respond to their emotions, helping them get along with other people.
- Prevent them from becoming 'dysregulated', i.e. having no control over their emotional responses or actions (also known as meltdowns)





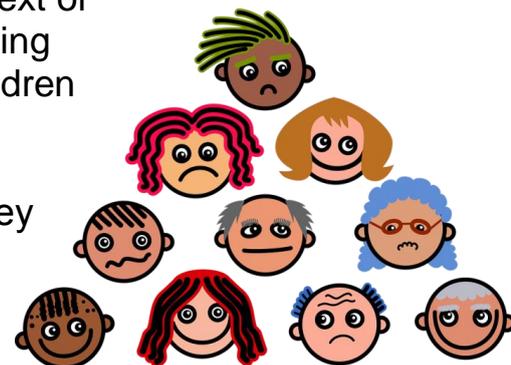
How does emotional regulation develop?

Self-regulation begins when children are babies, and it develops until they are adults. At each stage in development, a child may use different strategies to self-regulate to help them deal with emotions.

1. In the early stages of development children will mostly move and use physical strategies to self-regulate. For example, repetitive motor actions such as rocking, or spinning or finger tapping. The use of these strategies for self-regulation can remain into adulthood, particularly for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or learning disabilities.
2. As they develop, children may start using words to communicate with others how they are feeling. They may use language to express themselves, or to self-calm when too highly aroused. Children who are non-verbal may use pictures to express their feelings if they are taught to do so.
3. At later stages in development, children and adolescents learn to use strategies which include reflecting on how they are feeling, and choosing to use self-regulation strategies that have worked for them previously. For example, breathing exercises, or covering their ears in a noisy room.

Different things like tiredness, illness and changes to routine can all affect your child's ability to self-regulate. The current Covid-19 restrictions have made a huge impact on all our lives, and our routines have changed dramatically in a short space of time. It is understandable that this can have an effect on our emotional regulation, and particularly the emotional regulation of children with additional needs such as ASD or learning disabilities.

Most people learn to understand emotions in the context of social interactions, as at times it depends on recognising emotions in others and responding appropriately. Children with ASD or learning disabilities may find it difficult to describe their feelings, or recognise others' emotions. They may say they don't feel a particular emotion. They may have less emotional expression than other children, or their emotional responses might seem extreme at times.





How can I help my child learn how to self-regulate?

For many children with ASD and/or learning difficulties, effective emotional regulation must be taught directly to them. Here are some strategies to help your child develop emotional regulation, or self-regulation:



1. Provide your child with **consistency and stability** – this helps your child to know that even when they are feeling big emotions that can seem overwhelming, you are there to help them.

2. Help your child to understand big emotions. Explain a feeling by using words that they can understand – use pictures, books or videos to help you explain:



a. **Be responsive and talk about emotions** with your child. Label their emotions as they naturally happen throughout the day, so that they become aware of their different emotional states. For example, “You are cross because your toy is broken”. “You’re smiling, I think you must be happy.” See also Speech and Language guidelines for more information.

b. **Label emotions in natural contexts.** When you’re reading a book, watching a video or visiting friends you can point out emotions to them – “Look, Sally’s smiling. She’s happy.” Keep your language simple and at your child’s level of understanding.

3. If your child struggles with a strong feeling, encourage them to **name the feeling and what caused it.** However, if your child has become very upset or dysregulated, that is not the time to label the feeling. Wait until this time has passed and address it at a time when your child is calmer and more able to listen.

Please refer to previous psychology resources on the website on how to appropriately manage a meltdown for more information. Remember, it is okay to feel any feeling, such as anger, and everyone feels angry at times. Acknowledging your





child's feelings will be very important to help them to regulate: "I know you are angry because you can't go to the park", helps your child to recognise the emotion, and also gives the message that you recognise the emotion, and can validate their feelings. This can then lead to problem-solving when they are able to think more calmly—what can they do when they feel angry that is more appropriate than hitting or throwing things for example? Teaching your child alternative strategies to manage their emotions can be very useful in supporting them to develop greater levels of emotional regulation. The message is: "It's ok to feel angry, but it's not okay to hurt myself or others, or to break things. It is ok to talk about it or take a break."

4. For older children, you can try and **teach your child coping strategies**. For example, taking 5 deep breaths, counting to 20 in their head, or walking away and spending time alone. Practise scenarios in your home where they can practise using the coping strategies, and they can get used to using it for future reference. Strategies could also include the following:

- Asking for help
- Say it, don't do it. For example saying "I am cross" instead of throwing the toy.
- Relaxing and trying again later
- Asking for a hug



5. **Praise your child when they show self-regulation** and manage a tricky situation. For example "You were so good at waiting your turn", "I like the way you shared with your brother when he asked". This is really important, and particularly if your child manages to respond appropriately to a tricky situation that they can struggle with, such as waiting their turn or sharing. Remember to give more attention to behaviours you would like to see increase—this can be a helpful way of bringing your child's attention to the behaviour, and gives them the message that they can get your attention for appropriate behaviours.

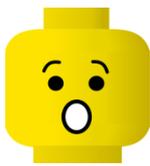
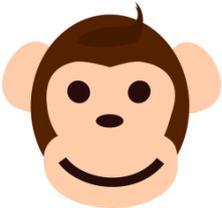




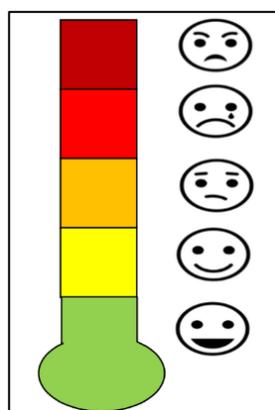
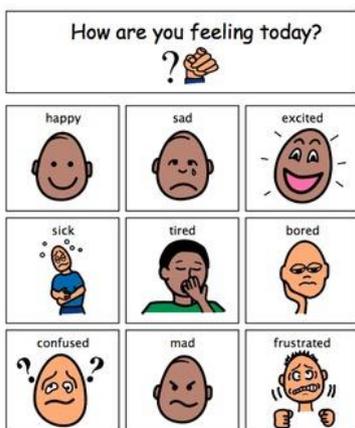
6. **Model self-regulation for your child.** Children learn from watching us, and how we respond to situations. Show your child how you respond to a frustrating task. For example, you could say: "Wow this is really hard to do, and I'm feeling frustrated. I'm going to take a break and come back to it when I feel calmer". Show that you are breathing calmly, and thinking about a situation before acting. This is easier said than done, and we all get frustrated sometimes, but try to remember that your child is learning from your response to difficult situations too.



7. When appropriate, using a **social story** that incorporates how your child feels and appropriate ways to react to a situation may be useful. This can be useful if there is a particular situation that brings up feelings for your child that they find difficult to manage, such as losing a game, or waiting for their turn. In the social story, explain the feeling, but give some solutions also about how to best respond to the feeling.



8. For older children, **using a visual system** such as an emotional thermometer, or a 5-point scale may be useful. This is a visual system that can help organise your child's thinking when they are working through difficult moments. When you first introduce this system, talk through the chart, and allow them to create their own labels for each level. They can then come up with different situations that make them feel at specific levels. Or, ask them about how they would feel in a certain scenario. You can refer to the chart when you sense your child is becoming dysregulated, and use it to effectively help them remember to use coping strategies when they feel themselves becoming upset / dysregulated.



Emotional Level	I feel this way when...
 feeling good	
 a little upset	
 upset	
 very upset	