



EMOTIONAL REGULATION

A guide to helping you understand why your child may be struggling with regulating their emotions and strategies to help them understand, communicate and regulate their emotions in more appropriate ways

What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation is something that all of us do everyday. Emotions play a key role in our lives, and while they can be difficult to deal with and overwhelming at times, they also motivate us to achieve goals that are important to us, help us to develop meaningful connections and quickly react to danger when needed. Therefore, emotional regulation isn't about ignoring or avoiding these important signals, but learning to acknowledge and validate emotions and finding appropriate ways of responding to them.

If we break down the process of emotional regulation, it is actually quite complex:

- **Noticing that we are feeling something.**
- **Correctly interpreting and labelling our emotions.**
- **Choosing an appropriate response to emotions according to the situation.**

Children may struggle with any of these stages, for example they might have difficulties identifying their emotions, understanding why they are feeling a certain way or communicating their emotions to others. Some children might be more likely to become upset because of something in their environment (e.g. when a room is too noisy or their routine changes).

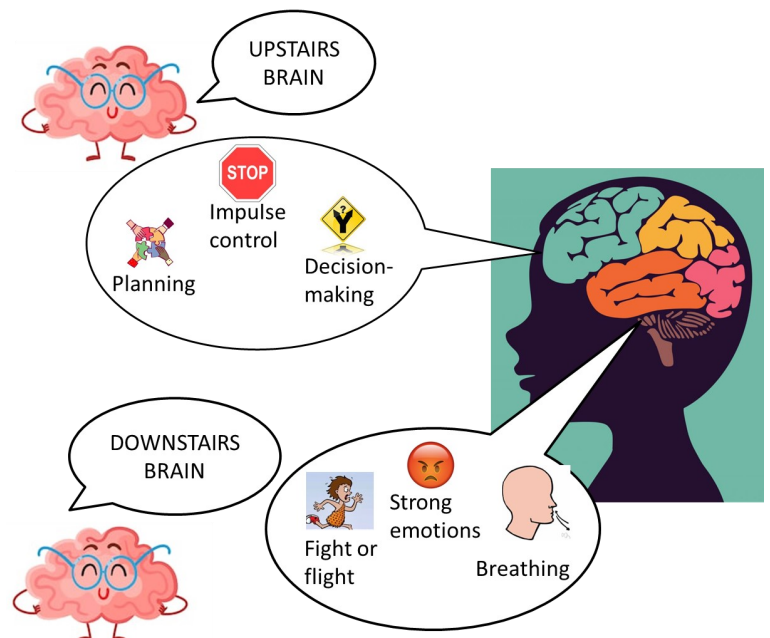


Children's development of emotional regulation

One of the reasons why children find it difficult to control their emotions is because **the relevant brain areas involved in emotional regulation have not fully developed yet.**

The parts of the brain located “higher up” are more sophisticated and help us in complex processes like decision making, planning and self-control.

Structures “lower down” in the brain are responsible for basic functions like breathing, running from danger and quick processing of strong emotions.



While the “downstairs brain” is well-developed even at birth, the more complex “upstairs brain” goes through big changes during childhood and continues to develop until early adulthood. This means that the tools that help us to self-regulate are still a “work in progress” for children. **Because of this, it’s important to have realistic expectations about how much self-control a child is capable of and supporting them to develop skills at an appropriate pace.**

Understanding reasons for behaviour

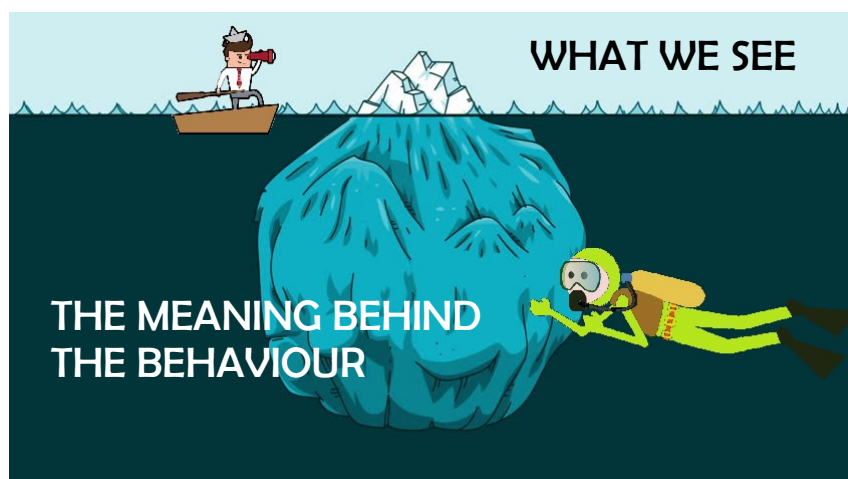
In order to best respond to your child, try to consider possible reasons for their behaviour.

Your child may be trying to communicate:

- “I feel...tired / hungry / thirsty / in pain / frustrated / overwhelmed / I need the toilet
- “I want that object / toy”
- “I want your attention”
- “I want to escape or avoid something”
- “I am not being heard / understood”

Other triggers could include:

- Sensory regulation needs or overload
- Habit (“I don’t know what else to do”)
- Programmed behaviour (if a behaviour worked before, it will be continued)



Developing emotional awareness

Giving your child the vocabulary to express their emotions is an important first step for self-regulation and in itself can reduce the frustration of not being able to communicate what they are experiencing.

Have a look at this chart with your child (or draw your own if you are feeling creative!) and try talking about the feelings you or your child might have. Some children might find it useful to put up a feelings chart in the house and use it as a visual tool to communicate emotions.



How do emotions feel in our bodies?



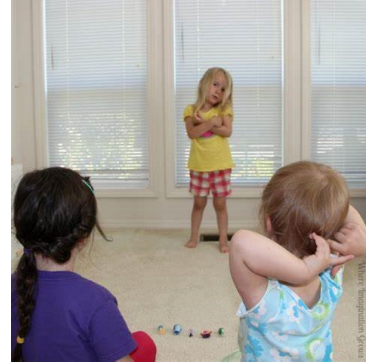
It can be helpful to talk with you child about how our bodies feel when we experience different emotions. Think about the last time you and your child were feeling a certain emotion, did you experience the same thing?

Have a go drawing how it felt on a blank body outline.

Learning through games

Emotions charades game

Try taking turns acting out different emotions and the other person can try to guess what the feeling is.



Make a face!

Cut out facial features and ask your child to create faces with them. You can then think about how you and your child feel when experiencing that emotion.



Emotional Jenga

Label each piece with an emotion, written in three different coloured pens. When pulling out a piece, check the colour and do one of the activities below:

- Pink: Make a facial expression that shows this emotion.
- Blue: describe what your body feels like when you feel this emotion.
- White: tell us about a time when you felt this emotion.



Feelings diary

Monday

In the morning I felt

In the evening I felt

Tuesday

In the morning I felt

In the evening I felt

Wednesday

In the morning I felt

In the evening I felt

Thursday

In the morning I felt

In the evening I felt

Friday

In the morning I felt

In the evening I felt

Each evening try thinking with your child about the feelings they felt that day. This can help them realise that emotions come and go, what their triggers are and what helps them cope.



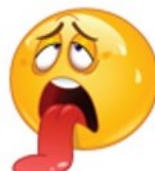
Angry



Happy



Sad



Tired



Surprised



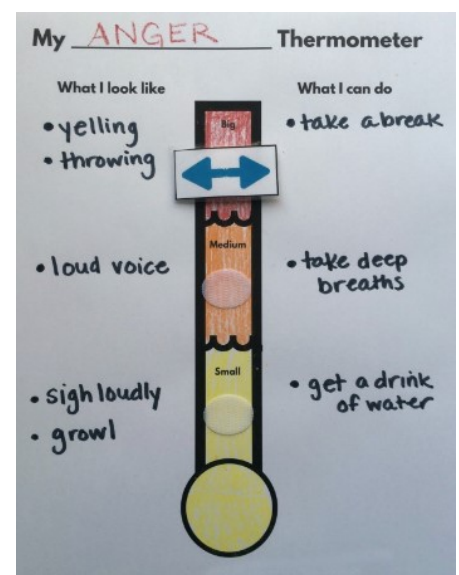
Excited

Intensity of emotions

It can be helpful to think about an emotional thermometer. If you or your child notice some 'warning signs' that they are starting to get upset, you can try to implement some strategies to avoid these feelings building up.

Feelings Chart			
Describe		How I feel	What I can do
	5	 I need some help!	
	4	 I'm really upset.	
	3	 I've got a problem.	
	2	 Things are pretty good.	
	1	 Feeling great!	

Using numbers to label how intense an emotion is can also help your child to communicate how they are feeling.



Coming up with solutions

It's useful to think about different types of strategies and tools that can help your child to manage emotions. Different strategies will be effective for different children and when dealing with different emotions.

Physical strategies

Anything that helps to release energy:

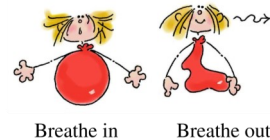
- Go outside and kick a ball/ run around.
- Do jumping jacks or use a jumping rope.
- Have a dance party.



Relaxation strategies

Anything that is soothing:

- Listen to relaxing music.
- Read a book.
- Take 10 deep breaths.
- Draw or colour.
- Hug a soft toy or blanket.
- Do some yoga poses.



Sensory strategies

Any sensations that feel good:

- Blow bubbles.
- Squeeze a stress ball or sensory toy.
- Get a massage with lotion.
- Make a sensory bottle with glitter, water and glue.



Social strategies

Anything that someone else can help with:

- Ask someone for help.
- Talk to someone about how you feel.
- Talk to your pet.
- Ask for a hug.



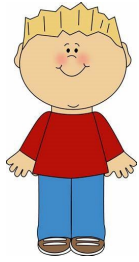
Thinking about strategies

It's important to remember that every child is different and you may need to try a few to see **which ones work best for your child**.

It's also important to think about **the timing of applying these strategies**. It is much easier to discuss emotions and behavioural responses when children feel relaxed and calm than when they are in the middle of experiencing a big emotion.

On the next page, try to identify a short list of preferred calm down strategies with your child. You can put this poster somewhere in the house and use it as visual prompt to guide your child when they are experiencing difficult emotions. You can set up some ground rules, for example "It is never okay to hurt others."





I can keep
myself calm by:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin grey border, intended for a drawing or illustration.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin grey border, intended for a drawing or illustration.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin grey border, intended for a drawing or illustration.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin grey border, intended for a drawing or illustration.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin grey border, intended for a drawing or illustration.A large, empty rectangular box with a thin grey border, intended for a drawing or illustration.

Breathe in



Breathe out



relax

Developing an emotional toolbox

Prepare a “calm down” box

You can put in any items that your child likes and finds calming inside the box, for example sensory toys, play dough, a musical instrument or a colouring book.

This gives them something to reach for it when they need some space alone to get their emotions under control.



Make emotion “trigger cards”

You can make these cards together with your child, so they have something they can carry in their pocket and reach for when they need it.

1. Think about common situations that triggers a particular emotion like “sadness.”
2. Draw a picture of that situation.
3. Write down/draw preferred coping strategies on the back of the card.

**When someone
doesn't want to play
my favourite game**



General tips

1. Model self-regulation

Children learn a lot through observing those around them. Describing and expressing your own emotions can help children understand that all of us experience emotions and that there are appropriate ways of expressing them. For example you can say: “I feel disappointed that it is raining and we can’t go outside. Let’s try to feel better by finding something nice to do inside.”

2. Praise good behaviour

Praise is a simple but powerful tool to encourage appropriate behaviour and build your child’s confidence. You can use it when your child has displayed an appropriate way of regulating their emotions, for example you could say: “Well done for using your words to tell me why you are upset. ” Try to be as specific as possible (tell them what they did well) and use it as soon as possible after the positive behaviour has happened. Remember to praise your child’s efforts instead of waiting for the “perfect behaviour.”

3. Look after yourself

It is very hard to take care of those around us if we are feeling drained and frustrated ourselves. Make sure that you are meeting your own emotional needs so that you can be a positive role model for your children.



4. Acknowledge their feelings and experiences

It can be tempting to try to make things “better” by saying things like, “you’re ok” or “stop crying”. However, it is more helpful to acknowledge your child’s feelings and experience, this way they can know they have been listened to and they can start to learn to identify their own feelings. You can do this by:

- Labelling the emotion for them—you can try phrases like:
 “It seems like you are ...”
 “I can see that you are ...”
- Reassuring them that it is OK to have big feelings.

5. Manage the environment

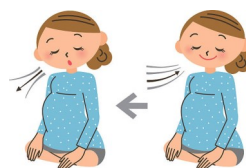
Try to make the environment as calming as possible. Think about:

- Lighting. Turn off or turn down the lights
- Noise. Turn off or remove anything that is making a sound. Silence or gentle background music is best
- Smell. Are there any smells that can be removed from the environment?
- Temperature. Is your child too hot or too cold?

6. Purposefully slow down

When your child is emotionally dysregulated it is easy to be caught up in this so:

- Breathe slowly and deeply
- Slow down your movements
- Keep your speech slow, simple, and in a low register



More resources

Useful websites for understanding children's behaviour and supporting emotional regulation:

- <https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/>
- <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions-linked-learning-disability/challenging-behaviour>
- <https://elsa-support.co.uk> – Emotional literacy resources; downloadable resources and online community for parents to support with understanding emotions in children
- <https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk> - Partnership for Children; charity supporting emotional resilience in children, they have resources around common themes like emotions, friendships etc.

Here are some resources to support parents'/carers' emotional wellbeing:

- Linking in with a Parent Forum
Westminster borough: **Make it Happen** (email: info@wppg.org.uk)
Kensington and Chelsea borough– **Full of Life** (email: Info@fulloflifekc.com)
- If you would like to access support for your own mental health, you may speak to your GP who will be able to advise you on available support. You can also self-refer to your local Improving Access to Psychological Services (IAPT) service by typing 'IAPT local service finder' in your search engine and putting in your post code. You will then be directed to a self-referral form for your service.

References

Concepts/ideas in this booklet were adapted from:

- 'Upstairs' and 'downstairs' brain- The Whole Brain Child by Dr Dan Siegel and Dr Tina Payne Bryson
- Emotional Charades game: <https://whereimaginationgrows.com/teaching-emotions-charades/>
- Make a Face game: <https://www.familydaystriedandtested.com/make-a-face-emotions-mood-board/>
- Emotional Jenga game: <https://childhood101.com/exploring-emotions-jenga-game/>
- Emotional thermometer: <https://copingskillsforkids.com/managing-anger>
- Feelings diary: <https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/uploads/Files/PDFs/Resilience%20Activities/Feelings%20Activities.pdf>
- Trigger cards: <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/downloads/anger-triggers-resource-pack-item-365/>