

Supporting your Child with Self-Regulation of their Emotions

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is a child's ability to manage their behaviour and includes the ability to focus and to control impulses. The capacity to regulate emotional responses is a skill that needs to be learned. It is not present at birth, and occurs as part of the healthy growth and ongoing development in a child. This development is dependent on the formation of secure attachment with a primary caregiver which begins with early parent-infant interactions. When a parent/carer is protective, available, attuned and responsive to the child, secure attachment develops.

However, when attachment is disrupted due to abuse, neglect, loss of parent, or other early trauma, it interferes with the child's emotional, social and brain development, which prevents the child from learning to regulate their emotions. "Emotional dysregulation" is the term referring to emotional responses that are significantly out of control. When this occurs, children's reactions can take the form of hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hypoarousal (freeze or dissociation). What triggers their dysregulation and the degree of response (from minor to major), is determined, in part, by their past experiences.

Two examples of dysregulation and suggested strategies for dealing with them

Child losing control in the supermarket or other public place

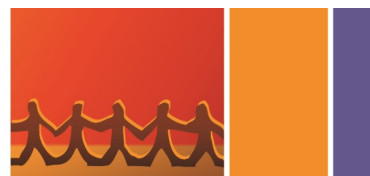
If you know this to be a regular trigger situation for your child, then create a plan that ensures your child feels connected with you and knows you are in control (although not controlling). Stay connected when you go out, using eye contact, touch, voice and short bursts of full attention to child. Having a child friendly checklist of jobs to do/ places to go can help. Enlist them in working through this – giving them small responsibilities. Playfulness and laughter can diffuse an upset in early stages; also slowing things down, listening, allowing child to spill their feelings where appropriate. (MacLeod & Macrae, 2006, pp 162-3)

Child demonstrating 'controlling' behaviour, such as passively refusing to do what you ask, or using delaying tactics

Remember that they are often not consciously trying to control or frustrate you. Their desire for control may be a learned survival technique which they continue to use because it served them well early in their lives. Because control is linked to the child's concept of survival, they will often initiate control battles unnecessarily. Restate the request i.e. "When you have finished xx, come and see me so we can xx", "Thanks for putting your clothes away, you are a great help" (even though they haven't started the task!). This explicitly voices your belief that your request will occur. A home life that has clearly articulated routines eliminates some battles. For example, a jobs list with ticks or stars for completion and consequences for non-completion gives choice back to the child.

Additional strategies and tools to help you support your child to self-regulate

- Accept your child's emotional outbursts as a form of communication, recognising that the behaviours are not intentional nor a deliberate attempt to make parenting hard for you.
- Provide stability and consistency as much as possible, such as predictable routines and clear household rules.
- Model self-control and self-regulation in your words and actions.
- Try to learn what the triggers are for your child, for example, parent being late; aggressive voices; particular smells; being told "No"; chaotic environments. This will help you to be prepared and find alternatives and also help your child to understand their triggers.



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- Teach your child specific breathing techniques which can help to calm emotions and regain control - for example 'Smell the flower, blow the petals' (breathe in through the nose, and out through the mouth); STAR breathing - Stop, Take a breath, And Relax; Diaphragmatic breathing, or 'belly breathing'.
- Lindy Petersen's 'Stop Think Do' Program 'Stop Think Do' is a social skills training program designed especially for children, which teaches the ability to perceive social cues, control emotional reactions and produce more socially acceptable behaviours. (www.stophinkdo.com)
- Teach your child 'mindfulness'. (www.smilingmind.com.au)
- Simple movement activities can help your child regulate their state of arousal: for example, rocking can be soothing; jumping can reduce the flight response.
- Help your child to recognise and verbalise feelings- sad, mad, bad, happy, scared.
- The 'Turtle Technique' is an excellent tool developed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton (1991) to help children to calm themselves when over-aroused:
 - Model remaining calm
 - Teach the child the steps of how to control feelings and calm down
 - Step 1: Recognise your feeling(s)
 - Step 2: Think "stop"
 - Step 3: Go inside your "shell" and take 3 deep breaths
 - Step 4: Come out when calm and think of a "solution"
 - Practice steps frequently
 - Prepare for and help the child handle possible disappointment or change
 - Recognise and comment when the child stays calm.

(for more resources on this topic see Webster-Stratton's website, www.incredibleyears.com)

Related Permanent Care and Adoptive Families fact sheets:

[Parent Help - Strengthening Self-Regulation](#)

[Creating a Safe Emotional Space for your Child](#)

[Time-In versus Time-Out](#)

References and links

MacLeod, J & Macrae, S, *Adoption parenting: building a toolbox, building connections*, EMK Press, New Jersey
Moers, C "Therapeutic parenting: when our kids are stuck", http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WU_HJY8md-0

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www.incredibleyears.com/ParentResources/helping-children-regulate-emotions.pdf

Webster-Stratton, C, 1991, "Turtle Technique",
www.challengingbehavior.org/do/resources/teaching_tools/ttyc_toc.htm > [PowerPoint](#)

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