



CONFIDENT & *Connected*

Quick Guide to Teaching Kids Emotional Regulation

What is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of a situation.

It's a set of skills that enables your child to inhibit their emotional or behavioral responses and direct their behavior towards a goal, such as making it till the end of the birthday party for the cake to be served or not hitting their friend so as to have an enjoyable playdate.

Essentially, a child's emotional regulation skills boil down to how they manage incoming and outgoing *stress*.

Research consistently shows that self-regulation is necessary for social-emotional *and* academic success and well-being and is one of the most important skills for your child to develop.

The hard truth about self-regulation

When your child is frustrated, upset or melting down it's all too easy to utter one of the universal phrases spoken by parents around the world,

“Calm down!”

“Get control of yourself”

“Stop crying right now!”

But here's the thing, many children are nowhere near developmentally able to calm themselves down, or regulate themselves independently, until around the ages of 7-10, and even then many will still need help.

The part of the brain responsible for impulse control and a multitude of self-regulation tasks is underdeveloped in children, in addition to all their sensory systems being immature (which are responsible for taking in and processing information from the environment all day long).

Due to these factors, a young child is oftentimes rendered physiologically unable to calm down by themselves.

This is a tough pill to swallow for many parents and caregivers, because of the fact that we often become frustrated and overwhelmed *ourselves* in reaction to our child's emotional chaos.

Why does this happen? That part of the brain I mentioned before (the one that's responsible for self-control and emotional control) literally shuts down when you're overwhelmed or stressed and you lose the ability for logic, reason, and rationality.

Which is exactly what was happening to your child in the first place.

That part of the brain is called the pre-frontal cortex and is often referred to as our 'thinking brain'. When any human, large or small gets stressed, their thinking brain starts to go offline as their emotional brain (or amygdala) is becoming activated.

Well, then what should I do?

An exponentially more effective way to approach expanding your child's emotional regulation skills is to envision an active partnership (known as co-regulation) for building self-regulation.

While this concept is seemingly basic, it's more challenging than it sounds. Take a second to call to mind how you feel and react when your child is in the throes of an emotional meltdown.

Many of our instincts echo something reminiscent of "get. me. outta. here!" which is why we are quick to order our child away to their room or to the corner.

Our own stress response urges us to move away from our child when they're floundering, when in fact what's desperately needed from us when helping our child deal with anger and other intense emotions is *for us to move toward them*.

It is, in fact, a caregiver's calm and steady physical presence (due to a child's hard-wired need for connection) that fills the gap of developmental immaturity during the time's a child feels and acts out of control.

If you can adopt this research-grounded mindset and step up in a spirit of collaboration with your child, these 5 steps are guaranteed to improve your child's emotional regulation skills with time.

6 Steps to improved emotional regulation skills

Step 1: Model positive emotional regulation skills for your child.

It should go without being said, but your child is almost always watching *more than* listening.

How you identify and respond to the stressors in your daily environment will be the best teacher and example when it comes to teaching your child self-regulation.

This is a tough wake-up call for many parents who never learned how to successfully manage emotions themselves. If you truly desire to give your child a strong foundation of coping with their emotions, going on this journey alongside them is a must.

Step 2: Help your child be a stress detective.

All children have particular situations, environments or sensations that create excessive stress for them, whether it be the common scenarios of lack of sleep and hunger or more particular things such as sensitivity to loud noises or transitioning away from electronic devices.

If you're not sure where to start when finding situations that are challenging for your child start by noticing when and where they present challenging behaviors such as whining, defiance or emotional meltdowns.

Helping your child cultivate an awareness of what consistently causes stress for them builds important skills of anger management for kids and empowers you both to prepare ahead of time for greater success.

Step 3: Empower your child with knowledge.

In my therapy practice, I teach my kiddos about their brain using the hand model from Dr. Dan Siegel which breaks down the neuroscience of their emotions in a simple way by looking at the upstairs brain (thinking) and the downstairs (emotional brain) and how our thinking brain goes offline when our emotions are running high.

This is the brain's typical and healthy response to stress so it's important to normalize this for them, as the feeling of being 'out of control' can be disconcerting and anxiety-provoking for many kids.

After we familiarize with brain basics we talk about the bodies 'anger warning signs'.

How do your emotions manifest physically in your body? Do your palms get sweaty? Maybe you notice your heart pounding?

Helping kids notice the physiological signs of anger is the first step in promoting concrete internal signals that promote self-awareness.

Step 4: Teach the basics of emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence is defined as the ability to recognize, understand and manage our own emotions and the emotions of others.

Emotional intelligence concepts are a huge part of emotional regulation and square one is making sure your child has a wide emotion vocabulary. Identifying emotions is the first step to working through them, so teaching kids that there are MANY different emotions and labels for various emotions, allows them to take the first step of working through them.

Step 5: Explore coping strategies together.

The next step after identifying the emotion is helping them find healthy and productive outlets for their intense emotions.

Every child's nervous system and sensory system is unique, so it is realistic to expect a LOT of trial and error, and to also expect that what works will change over time!

A few questions to get you thinking about what soothes your child:

Is there a particular space your child finds calming? Where do they run when upset or frustrated? Do they seem to calm with physical touch or appear to avoid it? Do they prefer to be around others or respond better to quiet solitude?

Step 6: Mindfulness and breathing practice.

First off, our bodies and minds are inextricably linked so some very simple things parents can do off the top to help a child with self-regulation are keeping consistent routines, meals, and bedtimes which all boost your child's emotional regulation skills.

There is a lot of research showing us the power of taking good quality breaths and how this soothes and calms our nervous system.

It's the first thing I teach kids in my therapy practice. In order for our child to seek out a state of calm, *they need to know how it feels to be calm.*

There is so much research on mindfulness and its ability to regulate our emotions and behaviors by strengthening our prefrontal cortex (the part of our brain that shuts down when your child is upset).

Incorporating simple mindfulness practices into the day goes a long way to keep your child's baseline emotional arousal level lower in addition to giving them an amazing calming strategy they can use anywhere at any time.

There is hope for improving your child's emotional regulation skills

While it may not seem like it mid-meltdown, when you move away from being an emotional referee and begin to view yourself as an emotional guide, with dedication and

development, the fruits of your labor will be more and more evident in the way your child interacts with the world around him. With time, you will begin to see them putting the pieces of self-regulation into practice when things don't go their way.

There is hope for improved emotional regulation for all children, regardless of any challenges they may face emotionally, behaviorally or environmentally.

“There isn't a single child who, with understanding and patience, can't be guided along a trajectory that leads to a rich and meaningful life.” -Dr. Stuart Shanker