



SEND Supported
Embracing difference

Understanding and supporting Children with Emotional Regulation Difficulties

“The reality is that well-behaved students aren’t behaving themselves because of the school discipline approach. They’re behaving themselves because they have the skills to handle life’s challenges in an adaptive fashion.”

Ross W. Greene, Ph. D.

“To me, the outside world is a totally incomprehensible mayhem which terrifies me.” Ros Blackburn, 2005

“My primary emotion is and has always been fear.” Temple Grandin, 2006

What is Emotional Regulation?

Emotional Regulation is the ability to self-monitor physiological arousal and emotional states. The cognitive skills a person uses to control, modulate and regulate emotions, outside of the context of frustration.

Self-regulation requires that a person have intact Executive Functions (EFs). Executive Functions (EF's) are those neuropsychological processes needed to sustain problem-solving towards a goal. EF's and self-regulation share a similar if not identical definition. Both involve goal-directed, future-oriented actions, both involve sustaining actions over time to achieve one's goals and both include problem-solving as part of those goal-directed actions. Moreover, when we look at a list of the mental processes most often listed as being part of the notion of EF, they include: inhibition, resistance to distraction, self-awareness, working memory, emotional self-control, and self-motivation. These are the very mental abilities already identified as being essential to self-regulation.

Signs of Emotional Dysregulation - what do we commonly see?

Many children we observe and meet in school are not able to identify or differentiate between different sensations, states and feelings and will not know how to move between one state and another, or recognise the need to do so. As a result they are not in a position to be able to self-calm.

- Difficulty staying calm
- Grumpy, irritable
- Anxious, nervous, worried, fearful, overwhelmed
- Sad, fatigued, tired, low energy
- Loud, aggressive, fidgety, inability to concentrate and stay focused
- 'On edge' and highly sensitive, provoking an emotional response such as aggression; tearful, a feeling of hopelessness and vulnerability
- Removing oneself from situations – running or fighting being the only strategy
- Cognitive distortions or biases (e.g., “It’s not fair,” “I’m stupid,” “Everybody hates me”, “I’m rubbish at everything”).
- Limited experience of being in a state of calm
- A frequently flooded nervous system resulting in unpredictable and 'risky' behaviour which can lead to melt-downs which appear to have no trigger to the outsider.

What do children with poor emotional regulation skills tell us? Some examples.....

- *It is difficult to stop doing something when I know I shouldn't do it.*
- *People tell me that I get loud and wild when I get excited about something.*
- *If there are other things going on around me, I find it hard to keep my attention focused on whatever I'm supposed to be doing.*
- *I become upset when things don't go my way / the way I am expecting them to.*
- *When I'm bored, tired or upset I fidget and just can't sit still.*
- *It's hard for me to notice when I've had enough (sweets, sugary drinks, etc.).*
- *I find it difficult to wait.*
- *I get upset easily and feel like I can't cope.*
- *It is difficult for me to control my temper.*

Attachment Difficulties - Many children who have experienced trauma and loss have not had the experience of their sensations and feelings being contained or translated for them. Children with attachment are more familiar with fear and anxiety in their bodies but may not know what to do to 'calm down' or 'relax'.

Autism Spectrum – Many children with an ASC have great difficulty controlling their emotional reactions. They can overreact to minor issues, have difficulty regrouping once upset or show no emotional reaction at all. Children with an ASC have difficulty identifying and labelling their emotions so they often interpret them as threatening. When the emotion occurs, the young person can feel confused, overwhelmed and not in control, hence feel vulnerable and unsafe. The child can feel anxious in anticipation of emotions and panic once they start to occur.

ADHD – Many children with ADHD have difficulty managing their emotions and tend to get stuck in whatever they are feeling in that moment. There is significant difficulty 'putting the brakes on' their emotions when they are angry or stressed about something. They may quickly become frustrated by minor annoyances, worry excessively about minor things, have trouble calming down when annoyed or angry, be over-sensitive, feel excessive urgency to get something so they act immediately. Consequently, they are likely to appear as less emotionally mature, more reactive with their feelings, hot-headed, quick-tempered, and easily frustrated by events.

For a young person with any one or more of the above conditions, their emotions confuse and overwhelm them. This can lead to shutdown and / or meltdown, when any coping skills they do have simply go out the window. At these times, the young person is likely to be flooded with stress chemicals. They may seek out strong proprioception (jarring to the joints and tendons) by hitting their head, head banging, or acting out in other ways. This is because proprioceptive stimulation releases stress chemicals from the nervous system.

What can we do to support and guide children to regulate their emotions?

The aim is to support the child to;

- Have increased self-awareness
- Develop self-esteem and highlight successes
- Recognise and learn a language about feelings and states and begin to relate these to situations
- Develop their ability to control their feelings and states
- Be more aware of the needs and feelings of others
- Have experience of what it is to be calm and relaxed

Strategies that may support the individual with Emotional Regulation difficulties include;

- Get to know the child well and build a trusting and secure relationship – be predictable and level in your responses.
- Consciously and actively listen – without judgment or comment.
- Validate the child's emotions. Teach them that emotions are normal and they can be in control of how they deal with them.
- Model good emotional regulation, describing your own feelings and demonstrating what you do to calm yourself down.
- Comment when you see the child is calm, settled and in control. Encourage them to recognise and be mindful of how they feel in these instances as they may occur infrequently.
- Identify the child's specific anxiety triggers and actively intervene at the earliest opportunity to reduce anxiety.
- Notice how the child communicates anxiety or overwhelming feelings – it's not just the crying child.
- Verbalise observations about the child. Name the child's emotions, for example, "*I can see you're disappointed*", "*You look really sad...*". When the child is calm, explain why they may have been feeling that way. Visual cues may be helpful reference points.
- Acknowledge and comment on what the child might be feeling and make connections for them (but not in the middle of conflict). Provide the child with a simple narrative, e.g. "*I noticed that your mouth starts to smile when Mary tells you a joke*" "*I notice that you are looking around at others who are working on their maths task. I think you are feeling worried because you are not sure what to do*" "*I can see how disappointed you are that you came second in the running race*". Where appropriate use visual cues to back up verbal comments and avoid commenting on how s/he *should* be feeling and how s/he should have responded.
- Provide the child with opportunities to experience what it feels like to be calm and in control - this will be individual to the child and require the adult to observe and know the child well.
- Name emotions as the child is experiencing them, or using a visual aid such as a "thermometer" to allow the child to recognise the bodily changes described above, before the amygdala sends the message to release the hormones associated with the fight or flight reflex, allows them to consciously analyse their emotions.
- Teaching about emotions should happen when the child is calm and receptive to learn. Role-play various emotions or play emotions charades. Use voice, body language and facial expressions to convey a feeling or emotion and take it in turns to guess the emotion.
- Look at books and magazines and discuss what a person might be feeling and why they may be feeling a certain way.
- Give them simple scripts to explain what they are feeling and to who.
- Use a 5-point scale as an aid to teaching the child to rate their emotions. The Incredible 5 Point Scale. By Kari Dunn Buron
- Develop a personalised toolkit to help the child regulate their arousal levels. 'Tools' may include a range of activities and visual prompts known to soothe the child, e.g. *stretch like a cat; drink a cup of water slowly; take a walk around the playground, close your eyes and think of your favourite place, count to ten slowly*. Include favoured items, e.g. favourite smells, textures, book, colouring, simple puzzle / sorting activity, soft toy, a range of familiar calming and organising sensory activities/items. Remember that you are not rewarding the child's anger, you are teaching them ways to calm themselves down and self-regulate.
- For a child who usually cannot control their emotions, it will take time for them to engage in and know how to calm themselves. If the child will allow you, try soothing them with whatever sensory stimulation that calms them (gentle pressure applied with the hands on the child's shoulders,

rocking, gentle pushing and pulling activities, being squished amongst large cushions, etc.) For many children, deep pressure stimulation helps calm and organise the nervous system.

- Co-regulate the child by engaging in a soothing activity together, e.g. breathing relaxation
- Sometimes the brain misinterprets a stimulus as threatening. When the person is in this state, logic and reasoning don't work, and they are not necessarily aware of why they feel so angry or afraid. Once a strong emotion is triggered, it is impossible to reason with or teach the child, so it is best to leave them to safely calm down, or to distract them.
- Eventually you should find that instead of the child using inappropriate techniques for dealing with their frustration or other strong emotions, they will start to recognise how they feel, verbalise it to a familiar trusted person and deal with it appropriately using the strategies they have learned.

This document was produced using information obtained from Bill Nason's Autism Discussion Page; The Explosive Child by Ross W. Greene;

I'm Hurting Inside. Practical Strategies for Supporting Children with Attachment Difficulties in Schools. By Louise Bomber