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ISG Parent Workshop

Boundaries and Big Feelings: Helping Children Build Emotional Regulation



Dr. Ivana Adzemovic, Psychologist and Psychoanalyst

Self-Regulation

The ability to control emotions, behavior, and thoughts to achieve goals or respond adaptively

It is a skill: It can be learned!

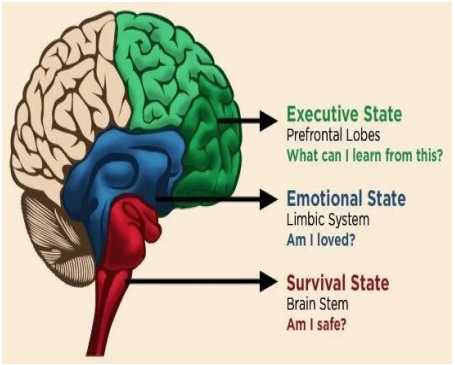
Benefits of learning to self regulate in childhood:

- Reduces emotional outbursts, impulsivity, and frustration
- Strengthens relationships
- Predictor of higher performance in school and work
- Investment in long term mental health and success

Self-Regulation helps children cope with challenges and develops resilience.

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Be Patient.
The Brain is Still Developing!



- **Limbic System:** (Feeling part of Brain) The “alarm system,” amygdala -emotional control center
- **Brain Stem:** (Survival part of Brain) Responds to the limbic system alert signals: fight, flight, or freeze stress response
- **Prefrontal Cortex:** (Thinking part of Brain) Executive functions, logic, critical thinking = emotional regulators

The prefrontal cortex continues to develop into early adulthood. However, our brains can continue to change and adapt throughout life. We can strengthen emotional regulation skills, even in adulthood.

When we are emotionally triggered:

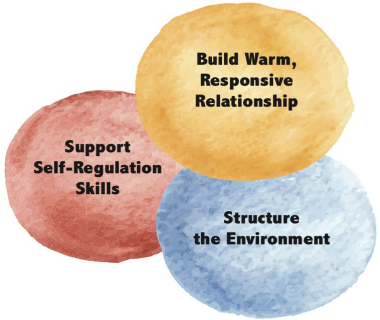
- The **prefrontal cortex** becomes less effective at regulating emotions and supporting clear thinking
- The **limbic system** becomes highly activated
- This can result in **challenging behaviors** in young children (screaming, hitting and biting)

CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION !

Before children can think clearly, they need to feel calm and regulated.

- Teach children strategies to calm their bodies and emotions.
- Correcting or redirecting too soon can increase escalation because children may not yet be ready to access logical thinking and self-regulation.

Key Developmental Phases



Early Childhood (3-5 years) and Adolescence.

A child's ability to self-regulate can increase particularly during thes
2 developmental phases because of more rapid development of prefrontal cortex.

- **These are critical times to build and strengthen self-regulation.**

- **Effective support during these stages can ease transitions into school and adulthood.**

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How Can We Teach Children Self-Regulation?

- Safe, warm supportive and responsive relationships
- A structured environment
- Caregivers' **co-regulation**

Teaching self-regulation looks different at different ages as child develops, but it remains essential throughout development.

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Importance of Relationships

Caregivers (parents and teachers):

- Safe, emotionally supportive and responsive
- Co-Regulation
- Model and teach self-regulation and reflection
- Set boundaries



Peers:

Importance of **free play** ⇨

Practicing regulation in social settings ⇨

Learning to negotiate, cooperate, take turns, and resolve conflicts (emotional and impulse control, cognitive flexibility and intrinsic motivation)

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Environment

- **Safe**: If children do not feel emotionally and physically safe, their are in "survival mode" (fight, flight, freeze), and they are not likely to learn and develop self-regulation skills.

- **Routines:** Predictable routines reduce uncertainty, which can be stressful for children. Knowing what to expect helps children feel in control and makes transitions smoother, reducing emotional outbursts.

- **Boundaries:** Children need clear, consistent rules and limits to understand acceptable and unacceptable behavior. It teaches children to regulate their impulses, think, and make thoughtful choices, within safe boundaries. Over time, they internalize these rules and begin to regulate their own actions.

- **Structured Space:** Chaos or unpredictability can overwhelm a child's nervous system.
  A calm, organized space with clear areas (for play, quiet,studying) helps children feel more in control and less reactive.

Co-Regulation



CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION !

Co-regulation - when an adult helps a child manage big feelings or distressing emotions by staying calm, offering comfort, and guiding them through the emotion. Over time, children learn to use these strategies themselves.



Caregivers: Self-Regulation → Co-Regulation

To co-regulate successfully, caregivers (parents and teachers) need to:

- Pay attention to their **own** feelings and reactions during co-regulation interactions with a child.

- Pay attention to their **own** thoughts and beliefs about the behaviors of child.

- Use strategies to self-calm and respond effectively and compassionately:
  - Take a moment to breathe deeply
  - Respond calmly to a child
  - Hold the boundaries

Using these strategies decreases escalation and teaches self-regulation.

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Boundaries + Emotional Validation = Emotional Regulation

1. HOLD THE BOUNDARY

- Children may become angry when limits are set. That is okay.
- Listen to and validate their feelings.
- Stay calm, consistent and firm.

2. VALIDATE EMOTIONS, NOT HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR

- All feelings are acceptable; not all behaviours are.
- Do not allow aggression or harm to others.
- Help children express emotions safely rather than punishing them for how they feel.

3. USE CONSEQUENCES THAT TEACH:

- Logical and directly related to the behaviour
- Predictable and timely
- Respectful and focused on learning

Remember:

Be warm with the child, firm with the boundary, and consistent in your response.

Responding to Big Emotions- 5 Big Steps

1: SET THE BOUNDARY
Keep everyone safe -“I won't let you hit.”

2: CO-REGULATE
Help your child feel safe and calm. “You were really angry. I'm here to help you.”

3: FOLLOW THROUGH
Use a logical consequence, not punishment, when behaviour is unsafe.
“It's not safe to keep playing when you're hurting someone. We need to take a break.”

4: REPAIR & TAKE RESPONSIBILITY
Once calm, help your child recognise the impact and make things right.
“Let's check if they're okay. What can you do to help?”

5: TEACH A NEW SKILL
Practise what your child can do next time.
“You can say ‘Stop!’, ask for help, or go to your calm space.”

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Increased Support

Some children need more support to develop self-regulation skills.



- **Temperamentally sensitive children**

Experience emotions more intensely or are more easily overwhelmed.

- **Children experiencing stress**

May find it harder to manage emotions when life feels unpredictable or stressful.

- **Neurodivergent children**

Children with profiles such as autism (ASD) or ADHD may need different strategies and additional support.

Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation

In infancy (0-1):

- Provide warmth and nurturing
- Anticipate needs and respond to cues
- Provide structure and consistent routine
- Provide physical and emotional comfort when child is distressed or dysregulated
- Speak calmly and give affection
- Modify the environment to decrease demands and stress

In toddlerhood (1-3), also:

- Teach age-appropriate rules and expectations
- Label emotions; teach use of words to express emotions
- Recognition and validation of the child's feelings
- Model waiting and simple self-calming strategies, as taking a deep breath, counting to 5
- Redirect child's attention to regulate behavior

Supporting the Development of Self-Regulation

In preschool-aged children (3-6), also:

- Teach identification of solutions to simple problems
- Teach and incentivize rule-following and task completion
- Teach, model, prompt, and reinforce self-calming strategies like deep breathing
- Provide external structure for calming down, including a calm-down space and materials
- Provide clear and consistent logic consequences, carried out in firm yet calm manner
- Acknowledge their emotions and help children label and make sense of them
- Adults should also talk about their emotions and demonstrate different strategies they use to calm down.
- Teach and model taking responsibility for our actions (**emotions are not excuses** for hurting others or breaking rules).
- Talk about how actions affect others: “How do you think she felt when that happened?”
- Encourage problem-solving: “What could you do next time?”
- Praise effort to manage emotions: “You stayed calm even though you were upset. That’s great self-control.”

In elementary school-aged children (6-11), also

- Assist in problem-solving more complex academic, behavioral, and social situations
- Model conflict resolution strategies
- Teach more complex emotion comprehension
- Prompt and keep teaching coping skills and calm-down strategies, including self-talk and relaxation
- Teach and support organization and planning skills needed for academic success
- Provide opportunities to make decisions and self-monitor behavior

