

Emotional Regulation Skills

Overview description

What is Emotion Regulation?

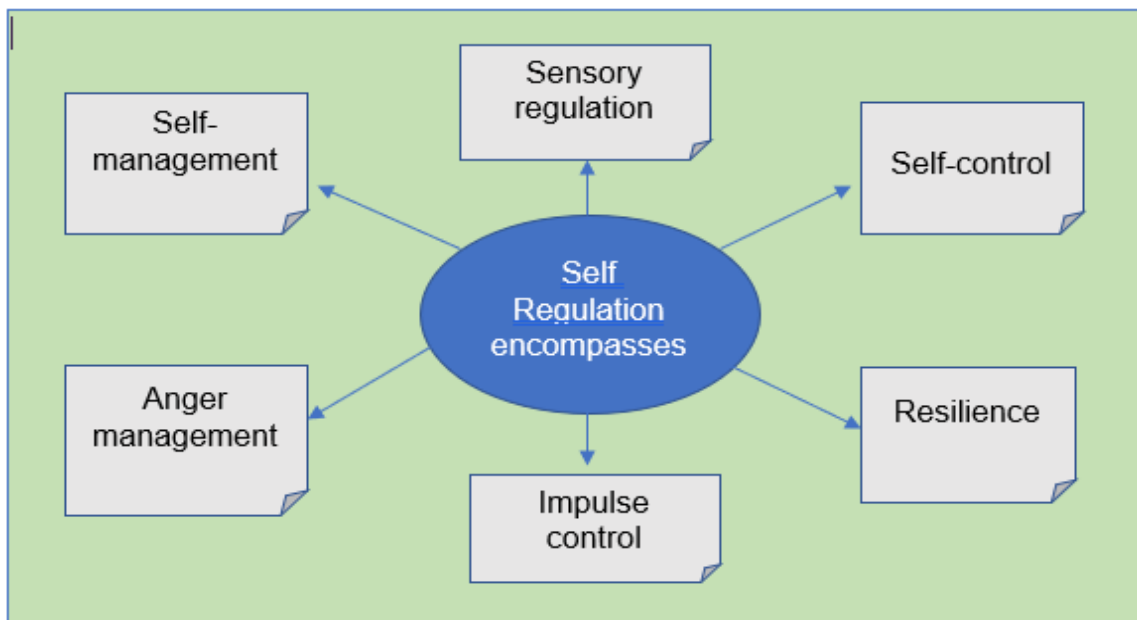
Emotion regulation is the process that allows individuals to influence how and when they experience and express their feelings. The emotion regulation process can be automatic or controlled, conscious or unconscious (1)

As this suggests, some situations will cause a person's emotions to escalate automatically / unconsciously, which in turn makes it difficult to avoid behaviours that others find challenging. For some people, seemingly small stressors can trigger big emotions and behavioural reactions.

Emotion regulation can be seen as part of:

- self-regulation, a set of tools that allows regulation of attention, emotion and behaviour and
- resilience, a quality that allows people to cope in the face of adversity(2).

Resilience is not static. It varies from context to context and over time depending upon a person's experiences and circumstances (3)



Signs of Emotional Dysregulation - what do we commonly see?

- Difficulty staying calm
- 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").
- A frequently flooded nervous system resulting in unpredictable and 'risky' behaviour which can lead to heightened behaviours which appear to have no trigger to the outsider.

Some developmental tasks requiring emotion regulation

- Tolerating frustration and tolerating being alone for reasonable periods
- Engaging others, developing friendships
- Recognising danger, coping with anxiety and fear
- Defending oneself within bounds of acceptable behaviour
- Developing interest and motivation in learning.

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.
- I find it difficult to wait.

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

- Get to know the pupil 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 CYP'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. If you shout – you are modelling poor regulation skills and are likely just going to trigger an escalation in the CYP's reactions.
- Comment when you see the pupil is calm, settled and in control.
- Identify the pupil's specific anxiety triggers and actively intervene at the earliest opportunity to reduce anxiety.
- Provide the pupil with opportunities to experience what it feels like to be calm and in control – this will be individual to the pupil and require the adult to observe and know the pupil well.
- Name emotions as the pupil is experiencing them, or using a visual aid such as a “thermometer” to allow the pupil to recognise the bodily changes which take place. (see the **emotion coaching** section of this toolkit)
- Develop a personalised toolkit to help the pupil regulate their arousal levels. ‘Tools’ may include a range of activities and visual prompts known to soothe the pupil, e.g. 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, drawing/art, simple puzzle, a range of familiar calming and organising sensory activities/items. This is a way of teaching the pupil ways to calm themselves down and self-regulate.
- For older pupils have a clear plan for difficult moments – where does the pupil go, what will be said when s/he arrives (the less the better), what will be available to him/her that help them to regulate/calm? If the pupil follows the plan then the outcome should be low level praise rather than reprimands/correction or criticism. Starting with “why have you walked out of Mrs XX's lesson” is rarely going to calm the situation!
- Look at ways to support the pupil's social network – relationships with adults and with peers. Creating and maintaining a sense of belonging (feeling respected, understood, and valued) supports pupils' ability to feel calm and regulated.

These suggestions have been generated using information obtained from Bill Nason's Autism Discussion Page; The Explosive Child by Ross W. Greene; and I'm Hurting Inside. Practical Strategies for Supporting Children with Attachment Difficulties in Schools. By Louise Bomber

What to do at moments of dysregulation?

Trying to reason with a pupil (give them advice about how they *should be* reacting), asking them what has happened or trying to debrief/resolve the problem are approaches which are unlikely to be successful once a pupil is heightened. In fact, it is likely to escalate the situation. It's helpful to follow the 3R's sequence of actions as suggested by Dr. Bruce Perry (Neuroscientist specialising in trauma).

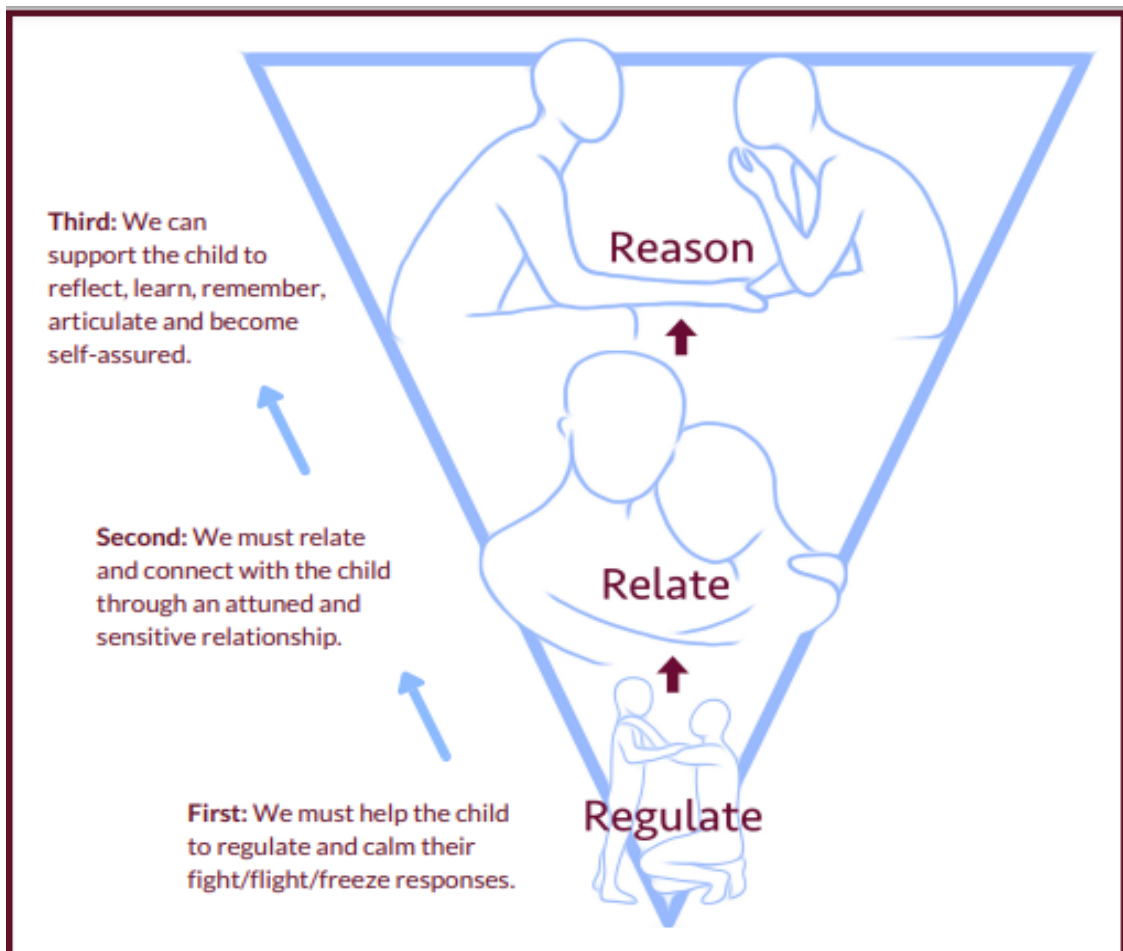


Image taken from <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf>

Research evidence-base

This review of evidence aims to give a representative flavour of the importance of school/setting wide relational approaches. It indicates that CYP who struggle with emotion regulation need classrooms with strong positive relationships and a clear sense of group purpose. This fosters a sense of belonging that allows these CYP to benefit from co-regulation of emotion.

SEMH needs can affect education achievement as much or even more than mild general learning difficulties^(4,5). Once CYP have accumulated multiple negative experiences over time, they become sensitised to perceived failure and so find it hard to engage with learning opportunities⁽⁶⁾.

Put slightly differently, by the time they are in high school, students tend to have an accurate understanding of their achievement to date and how this typically maps into the future. This insight almost certainly becomes part of the barrier to their success in school (7) and manifests as a reluctance to engage.

Disruptive behaviour is most effectively reduced by behavioural approaches particularly where academic outcomes are rewarded (8). However, to focus purely on rewarding success ignores crucial social dynamics. It is important to mediate positive images of students who struggle, since low class peer acceptance is consistently linked with student disengagement (9) and peer relationships are typically the most valued aspect of school experience, especially for CYP beyond primary school (10).

School-based interventions for ADHD (such as academic interventions) have been found to be more effective than drug treatment (11). This indicates how important it is to identify co-existing / underlying learning needs. Equally direct teaching of emotional literacy has positive effects both on behaviour and on academic achievement (12).

Looking at the classroom dynamic, the greatest beneficial effects come from a positive classroom climate where disruptive behaviour is reduced effectively and efficiently. The teachers who manage this are quickly able to identify and respond to potential behaviour issues, to clearly indicate appropriate / inappropriate behaviours and to offer group rewards based on clear expectations. They are able to form classroom relationships where the focus is on clarity of purpose and on functioning as a group whose members are all working towards positive learning gains. Rules and procedures are agreed through negotiation (13,14).

The focus on functioning as a learning group fits with evidence that:

- human physiology is built to function best in groups where people share a sense of belonging and safety that in turn helps them manage their emotions socially through co-regulation (15,16,17). When people are not able to feel calm (ie they are not in an environment where they feel a sense of membership) their mind's ability to learn is curtailed. Stressed brains have reduced neuroplasticity and reduced ability to form memories. Being unable learn causes inevitable additional stress (18). Supporting students' sense of belonging within positive peer groups and their school/college community is positively associated with reduced bullying (19). Students' sense of belonging and resilience are strongly related to the development of independent reflective study skills (20)
- behaviour in education settings can be improved through fully understanding pupils and providing them with supportive relationships (21)
- emotional learning is best integrated into everyday teaching (22). For example, using circles can increase the sense of being included and give teachers greater confidence in their skill to teach social emotional skills (23).

Using relational approaches will build in systemic resilience for those students who appear to be coping, but whose behaviour might deteriorate suddenly when they experience additional difficulty outside of education. This is important as it is estimated that around 15% of CYP aged up to 17 years (so about 4 or 5 students in

every classroom) live with two of the Adverse Childhood Experiences to at least a moderate level ⁽²⁵⁾.

Looking beyond the immediate school/college context:

- **moving settings** has a negative impact on (at least) core subject attainment ⁽²⁶⁾, with the key success factor being making a friend in the new school/college during the first month ⁽²⁷⁾.

- **home environment** is recognised as a strong influence on achievement in education. One of the most beneficial effects is parents being able to sustain positive aspirations and expectations about their children's future achievement. Being able to show interest in their academic work both in school and at home is also important ⁽²⁸⁾.

To summarise again, for students who struggle to regulate their emotions, effective approaches focus on providing safe social groupings. Here these CYP can learn to use trusted group members to provide co-regulation. Specific social and emotional interventions have most effect when followed up /taught within such social groupings.

Key Messages

- Setting-wide relational approaches will adequately support the social and emotional needs of many CYP and are appropriate to all ⁽²⁹⁾.
- The needs of CYP who struggle more than most to regulate their emotions should be considered, as with any other SEN, through the process of Assess-Plan-Do-Review cycles, involving external relevant professionals such as Educational Psychologists. Strategies may need to be individually tailored.
- Following this process will help to ensure that commonly co-existing and/or underlying learning needs are identified early on and are appropriately supported. In turn this should reduce some stress sources experienced in the classroom.
- Understanding a pupil's context will inform effective responses to challenging behaviour and emotional dysregulation. Every pupil should have a supportive relationship with a member of staff ⁽³⁰⁾ who can understand their perspective.
- Children and young people (CYP) who struggle more than most to regulate their emotions need to be considered as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the area of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH).
- Universal behaviour systems are unlikely to meet the needs of these CYP ⁽³¹⁾
- All teachers who work with CYP who present with emotional dysregulation (and therefore challenging behaviour) need training on specific suitable strategies ⁽³²⁾.

Top
Tips!

For Early
Years

- Think about the child's individual needs. Do they need/have you tried:
 - Solitude or company?
 - Stillness or movement?
 - Blanket or fan?
 - Tummy breathing?
 - Rhythm and repetition (e.g. large or small movements, words, songs, object manipulation)
 - Proprioceptive activities (e.g. stretching, lifting, squeezing/being squeezed)
 - Hand/foot massage
- Create a calm area/box for children to access freely when you, or they, recognise they are becoming dysregulated.
- Utilise an age appropriate version of the zones of regulation. For example children place their name next to one of the images from the Colour Monster book.

A useful video regarding support for children with challenging behaviour in the early years:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqpuY_It5X4&t=3007s

Useful Resources

Initial work to establish cohesive classroom groups can usefully draw on social approaches to developing emotional regulation:





- A trauma informed approach. 'Attachment and Trauma' training is available from One Education's Educational Psychology Service.
- Restorative approaches. 'Restorative practices' training is available from One Education's Educational Psychology Service. See also the link to Restorative Practices in the Inclusion Strategy Toolkit.

Ideas for each stage	
Stage	Strategies
Reflectivity and reciprocity	Create memorable times and ways to record them. Create opportunities for children to demonstrate the skills that they value Reflect aloud on own difficult experiences and ask for advice
Social Awareness	Restorative practices- and don't ask why. Model and describe repair. Create opportunities to give gifts/brave...
Managing oneself	Notice small indicators of self-regulation. Try out calming strategies
Trusting	SEAL, emotional literacy, feelings diaries, making positive choices
Sharing	Holding child in mind. Model sharing. Deal with lying and stealing as issues of trust and through relationships not punishments. Talk about trust and feelings of not being trusted
Safety	Check in with child- issues from the night before/that morning? Food, drink, warmth, background music, quiet spaces, soft furnishings. Routines: Worksheets for clear outline for the day, task cards and when/then. Build basic interpersonal skills: give the ability to feel safe with another person- simple interpersonal games, singing, music and drama. Clear expressions. Work on reducing physiological arousal through sensory activities/heavy work and central vision. Promote 'belonging': school keepake, jobs, displays, special box/space



- Approaches that tap into human physiology / neurology. 'Attuned Interactions and Creating Moments of Calm' training is available from One Education's Educational Psychology Service.

Summary of arousal states

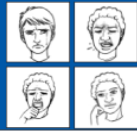


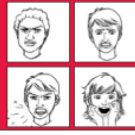
Calm	Flock/Alert	Fight/flight	Flop
			
Creative, able to learn and able to plan for the future.	Able to react to/plan within the immediate, but long term thinking is reduced.	Instinctive reactions to perceived threats. No thought to future consequences.	Little thinking, if any.
Truly sociable	Still sociable, but perhaps less attuned?	Loss of social skills and language	Loss of social skills and language

For staff to implement particular approaches and strategies effectively, it is important they feel supported by a strong ethos. Having an in-depth understanding of an approach allows them to appropriately tailor it to their particular circumstances⁽³³⁾.

Overarching approaches with relevant training are also available from:

- nurtureuk see <https://www.nurtureuk.org/>
- Five to Thrive see <https://fivetothrive.org.uk/>
- i-Thrive see <http://implementingthrive.org/>
- Secure Base see <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/secure-base-model>
- Zones of Regulation see <https://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html>
(see overleaf)

The ZONES of Regulation®

			
BLUE ZONE Sad Sick Tired Bored Moving Slowly	GREEN ZONE Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Ready to Learn	YELLOW ZONE Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	RED ZONE Mad/Angry Terrified Yelling/Hitting Elated Out of Control

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<https://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html>

'The Zones approach' uses four colours to help students identify how they are feeling in the moment according to their emotions and level of alertness, as well as guide them to strategies to support regulation. By understanding how to notice their body's signals, detect triggers, read social context and consider how their behaviour can impact those around them, students learn improved emotional control, sensory regulation, self-awareness and problem-solving abilities.

Where specific students require additional work to identify their emotions within the context of a trusted student-adult relationship, then the following resources can be useful:

- Tina Rae (2016) *Bouncing Back & Coping with Change: Building Emotional & Social Resilience in Young People Aged 9-14*.
- Tina Rae (2016) *Building Positive Thinking Habits: Increasing Self-Confidence & Resilience in Young People through CBT*.
- Paul Stallard re using CBT see <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Think-Good-Cognitive-Behaviour-Psychology/dp/0470842903>
- Warwick Pudney and Éliane Whitehouse (1998) *A Volcano in My Tummy: Helping Children to Handle Anger: a Resource Book for Parents, Caregivers and Teachers*
- SEAL see for example <https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/preventing-bullying-and-ethos/seal-resources>
It is important that individual / small group intervention does not replace an overarching approach.

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