



Self-regulation of emotions

by Leonie Arthur



The early years are a critical period for developing self-regulation skills, as this is when children start learning about themselves and others (Arthur, 2020, p. 3).

Managing emotions

It's healthy for children to express a range of feelings and emotions such as happiness, excitement, anger or frustration. Sometimes these emotions may be very strong, but it is important to remember that no feelings are 'bad'.

With the help of parents and educators, children can learn to manage or regulate their emotions by adapting their emotions to the situation and balancing their needs with the needs of others.

What do children learn about emotions in the early years?

Children begin to feel emotions such as happiness, excitement and frustration at around one to two years of age. Because they do not yet have the language to describe how they are feeling, they respond by crying or yelling when they get frustrated or angry. Infants and toddlers (one- to two-year-olds) recognise and respond to familiar faces and voices, show interest in other children by playing alongside them and may show understanding of others' feelings by patting or soothing someone when they are hurt or upset.

By preschool age (three to five years), most children develop the language required to name and describe their feelings. They also learn to regulate their responses to strong emotions, although they often require adult support.

Why is self-regulation important?

Self-regulation skills help children to:

- ❖ calm themselves following strong emotions
- ❖ interact positively with other children
- ❖ develop confidence
- ❖ persevere through challenging tasks
- ❖ meet goals
- ❖ cope with disappointment
- ❖ develop resilience.





How to support children in managing their emotions

Talk about feelings

When parents talk to children about feelings, this helps children learn the right words to name their own and others' feelings. Naming and being aware of their feelings allows children to manage emotions and communicate positively with others (Lowrey, 2016). Here are some strategies you can use:

- ❖ Talk about your own feelings. For example: 'I'm excited that we are going to the playground today'.
- ❖ Invite your child to talk about how they are feeling. For example, ask: 'How did you feel when you finished the puzzle all by yourself?'
- ❖ Encourage 'I feel...' phrases, such as 'I feel proud because ...'
- ❖ Describe your child's feelings. For example: 'You look like you are feeling sad'.
- ❖ Talk about and name others' feelings. For example: 'I think Xavier is worried that you might knock over his tower'.
- ❖ Talk with your child about how others are feeling, by asking questions such as: 'How do you think Gabriella felt when you told her she couldn't play?'

Read books together

Books can support children's social and emotional learning. It is important to talk with your child about what is happening in the book and how the characters might be feeling. This makes children aware of emotions and their causes and helps them develop strategies to manage emotions (Grazzani et al., 2016).

You can support your child's self-regulation skills by reading books with them and:

- ❖ talking about the feelings of characters—for example, by asking questions such as: 'How do you think Mimi might be feeling?'
- ❖ explaining fair and unfair behaviours—for example, by asking: 'Do you think it was fair ... ?'
- ❖ linking the book to your child's own experiences—for example, by reminding them of times when they were sad or excited.

Provide creative arts experiences

Creative arts enable children to express ideas and explore feelings. They can be a good way of releasing emotions. You could try the following activities with your child:

- ❖ Draw faces or bodies to show different feelings.
- ❖ Listen to music and paint or move your body to express how it makes you feel.
- ❖ Move in ways that reflect different feelings.
- ❖ Use musical instruments to create sounds that reflect different feelings.
- ❖ Sing songs, rhymes and chants that focus on feelings (see www.songlibrary.net and www.letsplaykidsmusic.com for ideas).

Guide children's behaviour

It takes time for children to be able to manage their emotions and behaviour, so it is important to provide encouragement when they attempt to regulate their emotions on their own.

If your child is experiencing strong emotions such as anger or frustration, sit with them to help them calm down, or encourage them to find a quiet space to calm themselves. You can also try to prevent frustration by breaking tasks, such as putting on shoes, into small steps.

Useful resources

For parents

- ❖ Be You. (n.d.) *Self-regulation* (Fact sheet). Available from www.beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/social-and-emotional-learning/self-regulation.

Children's books

- ❖ *My Friend Fred* by Frances Watts
- ❖ *Rodney loses it!* by Michael Gerard Bauer
- ❖ *Tilly* by Jane Godwin and Anna Walker
- ❖ *Tricky's bad day* by Alison Lester

References

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- Grazzani, I., Ormaghi, V., Agliati, A. & Brazzelli, E. (2016). How to foster toddlers' mental-state talk, emotion understanding, and prosocial behavior: A conversation-based intervention at nursery school, *Infancy*, 21, 199–227.
- Lowrey, L. (2016). *What is self-regulation? And what does it have to do with language development?* Retrieved from www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles/What-Is-Behaviour-Regulation--And-What-Does-It-Hav.aspx