



EMOTIONAL REGULATION

A guide to helping you understand why your child may be struggling with regulating their emotions and strategies to help them understand, communicate and regulate their emotions in more appropriate ways

What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation is something that all of us do everyday. Emotions play a key role in our lives, and while they can be difficult to deal with and overwhelming at times, they also motivate us to achieve goals that are important to us, help us to develop meaningful connections and quickly react to danger when needed. Therefore, emotional regulation isn't about ignoring or avoiding these important signals, but learning to acknowledge and validate emotions and finding appropriate ways of responding to them.

If we break down the process of emotional regulation, it is actually quite complex:

- **Noticing that we are feeling something.**
- **Correctly interpreting and labelling our emotions.**
- **Choosing an appropriate response to emotions according to the situation.**

Children may struggle with any of these stages, for example they might have difficulties identifying their emotions, understanding why they are feeling a certain way or communicating their emotions to others. Some children might be more likely to become upset because of something in their environment (e.g. when a room is too noisy or their routine changes).

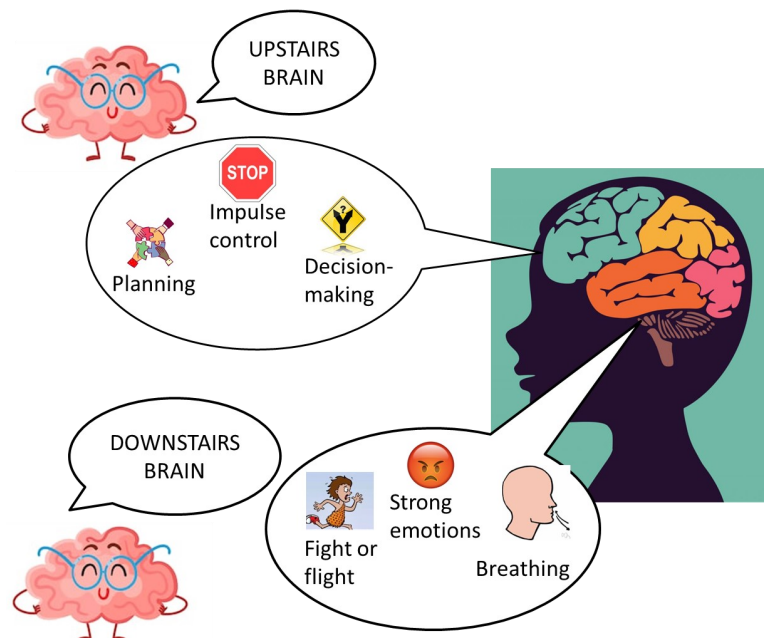


Children's development of emotional regulation

One of the reasons why children find it difficult to control their emotions is because **the relevant brain areas involved in emotional regulation have not fully developed yet.**

The parts of the brain located “higher up” are more sophisticated and help us in complex processes like decision making, planning and self-control.

Structures “lower down” in the brain are responsible for basic functions like breathing, running from danger and quick processing of strong emotions.



While the “downstairs brain” is well-developed even at birth, the more complex “upstairs brain” goes through big changes during childhood and continues to develop until early adulthood. This means that the tools that help us to self-regulate are still a “work in progress” for children. **Because of this, it’s important to have realistic expectations about how much self-control a child is capable of and supporting them to develop skills at an appropriate pace.**

Understanding reasons for behaviour

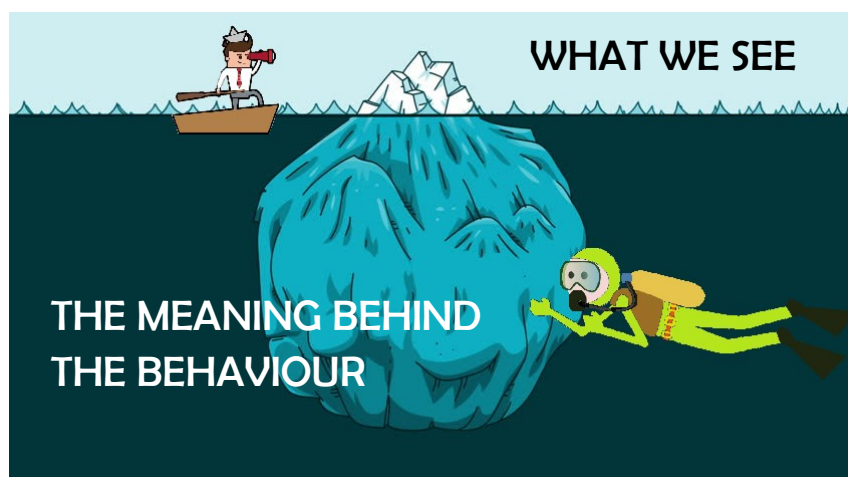
In order to best respond to your child, try to consider possible reasons for their behaviour.

Your child may be trying to communicate:

- “I feel...tired / hungry / thirsty / in pain / frustrated / overwhelmed / I need the toilet
- “I want that object / toy”
- “I want your attention”
- “I want to escape or avoid something”
- “I am not being heard / understood”

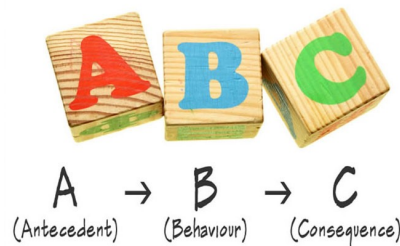
Other triggers could include:

- Sensory regulation needs or overload
- Habit (“I don’t know what else to do”)
- Programmed behaviour (if a behaviour worked before, it will be continued)



Understanding behaviour

Sometimes it can be hard to figure out what your child is trying to communicate through their behaviour. Every behaviour has a purpose and as parents and professionals, we need to become 'behaviour detectives' to try to work out the meaning behind it. You can use the chart below to help you think about specific behaviours and to start noticing any patterns or particular triggers. Once you identify a few main triggers, you can try to remove them or if that's not possible, to help your child prepare for situations they might find challenging.



Antecedent (i.e. what happened before)	Behaviour (i.e. exactly what happened)	Consequence (i.e. what happened after)

Emotional awareness

With children in the early years, supporting emotional regulation begins with raising their **awareness** of their emotions, how to **identify** them in themselves and in others.

I feel....



We can do this through:

- Modelling how we're feeling and why (e.g. I'm happy because...).
- Label about how they're feeling and why (e.g. when they're upset / sad you can show them a picture and say 'ah, you're sad because... X child took your toy').
- Using stories about emotions (e.g. Inside Out) to help them understand.
- Total communication: encourage children to communicate in whatever way they can, and respond to their communication attempts

Top Tips

1. Manage the environment

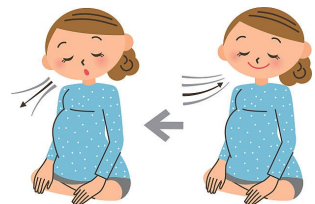
Do what you can to make the environment as calming as possible. Think about :

- Lighting. Turn off or turn down the lights
- Noise. Turn off or remove anything that is making a sound. Silence or gentle background music is best
- Smell. Are there any smells that can be removed from the environment?
- Temperature. Is your child too hot or too cold

2. Purposefully slow down

When your child is emotionally dysregulated it is easy to be caught up in this so:

- Breathe slowly and deeply
- Slow down your movements
- Keep your speech slow, simple, and in a low register



3. Try one of the strategies on the following pages

Read through the ideas on the following pages. Every child is different so try and find **what works best for your child**. It might take a while to figure this out, so don't give up!

More top tips

4. Acknowledge their feelings and experience

It can be tempting to try to make things “better” by saying things like, “you’re ok” or “stop crying”. However, it is more helpful to acknowledge your child’s feelings and experience, this way they can know they have been listened to and they can start to learn to identify their own feelings. You can do this by:

- Talking about what you think they are experiencing
- Labelling the emotion for them—you can try phrases like:
 “It seems like you are ...”
 “I can see that you are ...”
- Reassuring them that it is OK to have big feelings
- Encouraging your child to communicate their needs/feelings in other ways e.g. PECs symbols or Makaton signs

5. Have realistic expectations

Remember that if your child is experiencing a strong emotion then it could take them at least 20 minutes to calm down.

6. Look after yourself

It is very hard to take care of those around us if we are feeling drained and frustrated ourselves. Make sure that you are meeting your own emotional needs so that you can be a positive role model for your children. You can find some resources for parents on the last page of this booklet.



Calming strategies

- Sing or hum a known song slowly and gently whilst tapping or gently squeezing parts of your child's body in time with the music.



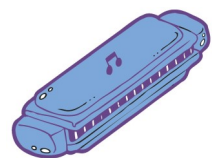
- Rock gently back and forwards with your child. Try and do this in such a way that your child has to push and pull to control the movement. The song "*Row, row, row your boat*" is a good song for this. Try alternating the rate of movement—doing one verse quicker and then slowing down for the next.



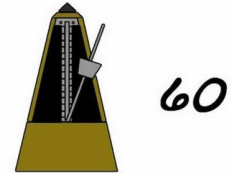
- Provide opportunities for your child to express their feelings in a safe and creative way – e.g. banging a drum (or Tupperware box if no drums at home!)



- Encourage your child to blow on a reed horn or harmonica (this helps to encourage deep slow breathing).



- If your child is running/pacing around, try putting on a metronome (free metronome apps are available) to 60 bpm. The regular pulse helps the brain to regulate and bring the heart-rate down.



- Oral motor feedback can also help to calm a child: Give your child a thick smoothie to drink through a straw.



- Tap a balloon back and forth between you and your child. You could do this in silence or with gentle music in the background, or whilst humming or singing a familiar song



- Sometimes children need support to process information from their environment (sensory processing) in order to calm. Below is a link for some videos that demonstrate some ideas to calm and ground your child:



<https://youtu.be/J39NVJ5WF8U>

Building a fort

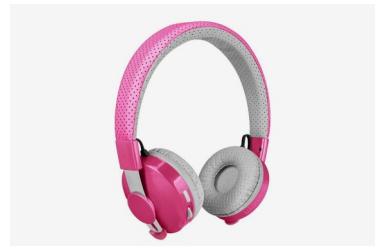
1. Turn off the lights; turn off the TV, iPad or any other screen.
2. Slowly and deliberately support your child to pull the quilt off the bed and go get pillows or other items to make a fort. This does not need to be perfect, the process is what is calming for the child.
3. Build a fort with them slowly.
4. Limit your speaking when building the fort, either don't speak or use quiet tones.
5. If there are environmental noises, close the door and put on soft, calm instrumental music without lyrics.
6. Slow your own movements so the child sees you slowing and does the same.
7. Breathe very loudly, very slowly so they pick up on your slow breathing rate.
8. Have them lie down and rub their back or massage their head for 5 minutes, without speaking and if they are able to tolerate this.



Prepare a "Calm Down Box"

Prepare a "calm down" box for your child, which can help them when they are experiencing emotions like anger or anxiety. You can bring this to them or direct them to reach for it when they are experiencing a big emotion.

You can use a shoe box and decorate it together with your child. You can put any items that your child likes and finds calming inside the box, for example...



Visual supports

To help children understand what's happening around them, we can use Visual Supports, like the ones below.



Makaton sign



Writing



Pictures & photos



Objects



Using visuals to help communication works well because many children with additional needs have very strong visual skills. Visuals are longer-lasting than words, and so give children more time to process information than words on their own. Some visual supports can be easier to understand than the a sign or word (e.g. toilet).

They can help children with:

- Routines
- Making choices
- Understanding events
- Transitions and change
- Understanding and expressing emotions
- Following instructions
- Understanding social rules (e.g. turn-taking)
- Developing vocabulary and spoken language
- Increasing independence and participation
- Labelling the environment


Objects of Reference

You might use an object to help your child understand what will happen next. If these are small enough, these can be stuck to a large board using Velcro to create a **timetable or choice board**.

Parts of an object could also be used, for example a piece of towel to represent bath time, or a piece cut from clothing to represent a person.

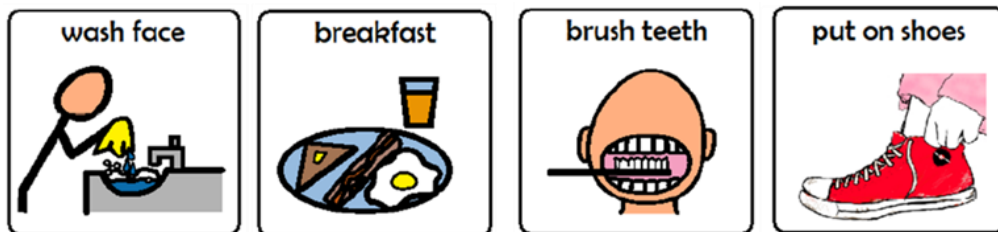
Managing transitions using visuals

- This supports children's **understanding** of what's going on
- Increases **predictability** of what might happen next
- **Reduces anxiety**
- Children with SCD / ASD can have difficulty **moving from one activity** to another, we can help them to learn to do this more easily. This helps to reduce frustration.

Object	Meaning	
Toy bus	We're going on the bus	
Piece of towel	It's bath time	
Toy spoon	Dessert	
Doll's coat	It's home time	
Ping pong ball	Outside playtime	
Square of dress fabric	Mummy	

Visual timetables

Help children know what will happen **throughout the day** / activity
This can **reduce anxiety** about knowing what might happen next.
As children get older, you can use this to support them to be more **independent**.



Countdowns

- Help children **anticipate the end** of an activity.
- Give a **warning**, e.g. 'Playtime will finish in 2 minutes', then give them a little more time, before **counting down from 5** on your hand (this also counts as a visual!)
- Then say '**playtime is finished**' and encourage the child to tidy up the activity
- You can also use **sand timers**, countdown charts or a '**tidy up**' song



More resources

Useful websites for understanding children's behaviour and supporting emotional regulation:

- <https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/>
- <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions-linked-learning-disability/challenging-behaviour>
- <https://elsa-support.co.uk> – Emotional literacy resources; downloadable resources and online community for parents to support with understanding emotions in children
- <https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk> - Partnership for Children; charity supporting emotional resilience in children, they have resources around common themes like emotions, friendships etc.

Here are some resources to support parents'/carers' emotional wellbeing:

- Linking in with a Parent Forum
Westminster borough: **Make it Happen** (email: info@wppg.org.uk)
Kensington and Chelsea borough– **Full of Life**
(email: Info@fulloflifekc.com)
- If you would like to access support for your own mental health, you may speak to your GP who will be able to advise you on available support. You can also self-refer to your local Improving Access to Psychological Services (IAPT) service by typing 'IAPT local service finder' in your search engine and putting in your post code. You will then be directed to a self-referral form for your service.