

Keeping a balance: Managing feelings and behaviours

Children experience ups and downs when they are trying to manage their feelings and behaviours. Helping them to find ways to balance this is called self-regulation.

How does self-regulation develop?

Sensitive and comforting care from warm, supportive and trusted adults helps children develop self-regulation. Children can also learn how to regulate their feelings by watching their parents and carers manage their own feelings and behaviours. Seeing their parents and carers effectively manage their own feelings and behaviours helps children learn how to do this for themselves.

Why is self-regulation important for mental health?

Self-regulation skills are linked to how well children manage many other tasks during early childhood. For example, as a child learns how to self-regulate, skills such as concentrating, sharing and taking turns develop. This enables a child to move from depending on others to beginning to manage by themselves. Most children at some stage will struggle to manage their feelings and behaviours, particularly when they are tired, hungry or facing new experiences. When this happens, they might become upset, sulky or angry.

This is all part of being a young child and is not necessarily cause for concern. However, difficulties in emotional and behavioural self-regulation that occur often, across a number of settings and over long periods of time can be warning signs that mental health difficulties may be present. Examples of self-regulation difficulties in children include ongoing difficulties with concentration (e.g., being able to listen to a story), looking very sad and uninterested in daily activities (e.g., playing with other children), or becoming easily upset and worries so they are unable to move on. In this situation talking with a health professional may be useful.



What helps develop self-regulation?

Parents, carers and staff play an important role in helping children learn to self-regulate their feelings and behaviour. There are many opportunities for this in the normal routine of day-to-day life. Some of the ways adults can support children's development of self-regulation skills include:

- ▶ Closely observing a child to help you to see what they are coping with and where they might need more support. Providing the support children need at times when they are upset, tired or angry helps them to develop their self-regulation skills.
- ▶ Breaking down complicated tasks into manageable parts so that children can practice self-regulation without becoming overwhelmed. Activities like learning to get dressed, turn taking, listening to others and working out differences give children an opportunity to practice their self-regulation skills with the support and guidance of a trusted adult.
- ▶ Demonstrating effective self-regulation of their own feelings and behaviours. Children learn how other people behave by watching the people around them. When parents, carers and staff effectively manage their own feelings and behaviour they model self-regulation skills to children. Adults model behaviour every day, such as the way that they talk to people, wait for the traffic lights to change or decide what TV program to watch, for example. These all require self-regulation of feelings and behaviour.
- ▶ Using words, gestures and touch as cues to help children regulate their feelings and behaviour. Naming feelings for young children like 'You sound angry' or 'I wonder if you are frustrated' help children recognise their emotions. When gentle touch and words are used together this can act as a cue for children to start calming themselves, for example, 'let's relax or 'I am here to help you'.

Other suggestions to consider

Other suggestions that can be useful when helping children keep a balance and manage their feelings and behaviours are:

- ▶ being calm
- ▶ responding and acknowledging what children are trying to communicate
- ▶ using supportive boundaries, routines and limits to provide structure and predictability
- ▶ making sure experiences are suited to the age of the child
- ▶ showing empathy and care towards children.

For more information on these suggestions go to *Component 2: Developing children's social and emotional skills: 'Helping children to manage their emotions'*.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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