

How Can We Help Kids With Emotional Self-Regulation?

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If you're a parent, chances are you've witnessed a tantrum or two in your day. We expect them in two-year-olds. But if your child reaches school age and meltdowns and outbursts are still frequent, it may be a sign that they have difficulty with emotional self-regulation.

Simply put, self-regulation is the difference between a two-year-old and a five-year-old who is more able to control their emotions. Helping kids who haven't developed self-regulation skills at the typical age is the goal of parent training programs. And many older children, even if they're beyond tantrums, continue to struggle with impulsive and inappropriate behavior.

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to a change in expectations, and to handle frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables children, as they mature, to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

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What does emotional dysregulation look like?

Problems with self-regulation manifest in different ways depending on the child, says Matthew Rouse, PhD, a clinical psychologist. "Some kids are instantaneous — they have a huge, strong reaction and there's no lead-in or build-up," he says. "They can't inhibit that immediate behavior response."

For other kids, he notes, distress seems to build up and they can only take it for so long. Eventually it leads to some sort of behavioral outburst. "You can see them going down the wrong path but you don't know how to stop it."

The key for both kinds of kids is to learn to handle those strong reactions and find ways to express their emotions that are more effective (and less disruptive) than having a meltdown.

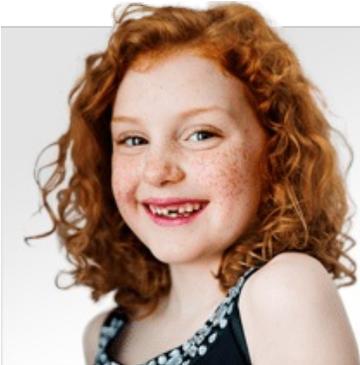
Why do some kids struggle with self-regulation?

Dr. Rouse sees emotional control issues as a combination of temperament and learned behavior.

“A child’s innate capacities for self-regulation are temperament and personality-based,” he explains. Some babies have trouble self-soothing, he adds, and get very distressed when you’re trying to bathe them or put on clothes. Those kids may be more likely to experience trouble with emotional self-regulation when they’re older.

But the environment plays a role as well. When parents give in to tantrums or work overtime to soothe their children when they get upset and act out, kids have a hard time developing self-discipline. “In those situations, the child is basically looking to the parents to be external self-regulators,” Dr. Rouse says. “If that’s a pattern that happens again and again, and a child is able to ‘outsource’ self-regulation, then that’s something that might develop as a habit.”

Children with ADHD or anxiety may find it particularly challenging to manage their emotions, and need more help to develop emotional regulation skills.



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How do we teach self-regulation skills?

Scott Bezsylo, the executive director of the Winston Prep schools for children with learning differences, says that acting out is essentially an ineffective response to a stimulus. The parent or teacher needs to help the child slow down and more carefully choose an effective response instead of being impulsive.

“We approach self-regulation skills in the same way we approach other skills, academic or social: isolate that skill and provide practice,” Bezsylo explains. “When you think of it as a skill to be taught — rather than, say, just bad behavior — it changes the tone and content of the feedback you give kids. ”

The key to learning self-regulation skills, says Dr. Rouse, is not to avoid situations that are difficult for kids to handle, but to coach kids through them and provide a supportive framework — clinicians call it “scaffolding” the behavior you want to encourage — until they can handle these challenges on their own.

Imagine a situation that can produce strong negative emotions, like a frustrating math homework assignment. If a parent hovers too much, they risk taking over the regulation role. “Instead of the child recognizing that the work is frustrating and figuring out how to handle it,” Dr. Rouse explains, “what they feel is that the parent is frustrating them by making them do it.”

Scaffolding in this situation might be helping the child with one problem, and then expecting them to try the rest. If they feel frustrated, they might get up and get a drink. They might use a timer to give themselves periodic breaks. The parent would check in on them at intervals, and offer praise for their efforts.

If a child is prone to melting down when they’re asked to stop playing a video game, scaffolding might be practicing transitioning away from the game. “You’d want to practice with a game in which they’re not overly invested — you don’t want to begin with high-stakes,” Dr. Rouse explains. “Have them practice playing for two or three minutes and then handing you the game. They get points towards something they want every time they do it.”

Practice runs

Dry runs are another way to scaffold self-regulation. For instance, if you’ve had trouble with a child reacting impulsively or having a tantrum in a store, make a short visit when you don’t need to do serious shopping. Have them practice walking with you, keeping their hands to themselves. They get points towards some goal every time they are successful.

Dr. Rouse says that often parents get discouraged when things don’t go well the first time they try skill-building, but consistency and starting at a level that is appropriate for your child are key. Rather than giving up, try paring down the activity so it is more doable, and slowly give your child more and more independence to handle it.

For instance, if brushing their teeth is a problem for your child, you might start by focusing just on putting toothpaste on the brush, and respond with positive feedback and rewards when they do it. Once they’ve practiced that a few times, add the next step in the chain.

Similarly, if getting out the door in the morning is causing meltdowns, target one step at a time. First, say, getting dressed by 7:15. Once they’ve mastered that, set a target time for breakfast, and add that. Breaking the chain into small steps allows them to build self-regulation skills in manageable increments.

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Help kids become self-reflective

Bezsylo stresses that when parents or teachers approach impulsive, inappropriate behavior calmly and give them time, kids can learn to choose better ways to respond to that situation. The feedback kids need is non-judgmental and non-emotional: what went wrong, and why, and how they can fix it next time.

“When kids are part of an environment that’s reflective and analytic as opposed to emotional and fast-paced,” Bezsylo explains, “they can learn to make better choices.” Slowing down allows children to become more thoughtful, reflective and self-aware. “We need to slow down and model self-reflection and self-awareness and self-regulation for our kids,” he notes, “but it’s also helpful and good for us, too.”

Bezsylo notes that mindfulness and meditation are good for everyone, but especially for children with self-regulation challenges. And Dr. Rouse mentions the many parent training programs available to help them become better coaches for their kids. For older kids, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is also an option, as it focuses on distress tolerance and emotion regulation.

At the end of the day, though, nothing can replace the work of the parent. “It seems to me,” says Dr. Rouse, “that the family environment is the most important piece.”