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Emotional Regulation Difficulties

What is it?

Emotional regulation refers to our ability to understand and manage our emotions and how we respond to these emotions. We learn how to regulate our emotions through interactions with parents, carers, peers and other adults (e.g. other family members, teachers).

Initially babies are entirely dependent on their parents/carers to regulate their emotions. Difficulties with emotional regulation are typical in very young children, such as toddlers, as they are still learning what emotions are and how to regulate themselves. At this stage, parents and carers are key in helping the child to regulate their emotions or 'co-regulating' their emotions with them. Repeated experiences of adults helping the child to regulate their emotions (co-regulation) enable the child to begin to develop skills in regulating their own emotions.

As children get older and reach primary school age, typically they are beginning to understand and regulate their own emotions ('self-regulation'). However throughout childhood, particularly in times of stress, children require help from an adult to regulate themselves. Children who experience significant life events (such as loss) in their early years may struggle to a greater extent to regulate their emotions, and will likely need additional help from adults to 'co-regulate' for longer. Children who have additional needs such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may also need extra support to 'co-regulate' their emotions. Children who persistently have highly intense emotional reactions, are unable to calm themselves down or adjust to a change in routine, may be struggling with emotional regulation difficulties.

Signs and Symptoms

Emotional regulation difficulties can present in different ways. Children struggling to regulate their emotions may:

- Be unable to calm themselves down
- Have outbursts when things don't go their way
- Overreact to minor difficulties
- Show aggressive behaviours (hitting, shouting, throwing things)
- Run off
- Withdraw when they experience difficult emotions
- Become extremely tearful
- Be impulsive
- Hurt themselves
- Get very overexcited
- Be unable to cope with change

Suggestions for Parents & Carers

There are a few things that parents and carers can do to help children manage and regulate their emotions.

1. Support and teach children to recognise and name their emotions

In order to regulate emotions, we first need to understand what they are. Many children with emotional regulation difficulties cannot distinguish between different emotions and often confuse feelings of anxiety with anger. Emotional literacy takes time to develop so this will need to be a long term goal rather than a short lesson. Start with easier emotions such as happy, sad and angry before moving onto more complex emotions such as frustration, jealousy and shame.

A good way to develop emotional literacy is to name emotions children appear to be experiencing (rather than ask them what they feel). This helps them to develop language to understand what they are feeling and start to recognise their own emotions.

2. Teach children to understand how emotions affect our bodies

Emotions can evoke physiological responses on our bodies, for example when we are worried we might notice we have an increased heart rate, high body temperature and sweating. As part of understanding emotions, understanding how they impact our bodies is a great way of teaching children to recognise their emotions so that they can then begin to regulate them.

3. Find alternative ways to express and regulate emotions

Once children start to understand their emotions and how they can affect our bodies, we can begin to support them to develop alternative ways to manage intense feelings:

- **Co-Regulation**

Children need to be dependent before they can be independent. Children will need to 'borrow' regulation from an adult who is regulating their own emotional state well before being able to regulate for themselves. Using a PACE approach (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) can help when co-regulating a child. Be curious about the child's experience ("*I wonder if the reason you're so cross is because you want to keep playing?*"), accept and empathise with how they may be feeling ("*You don't want to go to shopping today, it's so hard when we have to do things we don't want to!*") and use play to help them regulate.

Below are some playful activities that parents can do with children to help them regulate their emotions.

- **5,4,3,2,1, Grounding exercise:** ask the child to notice: 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste)
- **Sensory boxes:** filled with sensory regulating items e.g. feathers, glitter bottles, stress balls, play dough)
- **Blowing bubbles:** helps to slow breathing
- **Stretches and yoga:** <https://www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/#yoga>
- **Nature walks:** walk around the local area e.g. a park – can also incorporate counting or noticing objects e.g. how many birds you see. If getting outside is not possible you can walk around the garden or house and also count or take notice e.g. all the things that are blue

Some children may need to release pent up emotions before they become overwhelmed, and so physical exercise is a helpful preventative strategy. For example, encourage your child to do some physical activities before doing something you anticipate they may find difficult.

Children will need lots of support and 'doing with' to use new coping skills. For example, if you have a child who is beginning to show signs of emotional dysregulation, saying "you're starting to feel annoyed, let's go for play with the ball in the garden" can support them to use alternative emotional regulation strategies. It is important to first practice coping strategies with children while they are regulated. It is hard to try out something new when struggling to regulate emotions.

- **Self-Regulation**

Once a child is able to co-regulate their emotions with their parent or carer, they will begin to start self-regulating their own emotions. Encourage and teach use of coping skills such as:

- Breathing exercises for example **Finger Breathing Exercises** (Hold out your hand and stretch out your fingers, with your other hand trace along the outline of your hand breathing in when going up the finger or thumb and exhaling when going down the finger or thumb – repeat 5 times)
- Distraction: doing an activity they enjoy e.g. reading
- Physical activities: running, using trampoline, star jumps, playing ball games
- Mindfulness: colouring, 'chill zone'

You may notice that your child is self-regulating more frequently but this does not mean that they no longer need your support. As children face difficult times or situations, they will rely on parents and carers to help guide them. In offering on-going opportunities for co-regulation, you are helping to teach the child to express emotions and rely on adults to support them when needed.

Note: It is important to consider as parents how well regulated our own emotions are before trying to co-regulate with children. As stated above 'Children need to borrow our regulation'; if we are struggling to stay regulated, we can't regulate our children.

Useful websites / Resources

Further information on emotional regulation and resources

<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/emotional-regulation>

Resources to help educate children on emotions

<https://inclusiveteach.com/2019/04/03/behaviour-and-emotion-resources/>

Window of tolerance video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVEDueyZ2C4>



This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg