



Children's Services  
Since 1895



# Emotional Regulation Guidebook

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# What is Emotional Regulation?

**Emotional regulation is the ability to understand our feelings and manage our reactions to those emotions.**

Emotional Regulation can include:

- ▶ Understanding what causes us to feel the way we do.
- ▶ Being able to identify and name what we are feeling and how that emotion impacts on us.
- ▶ Being able to control our responses to strong feelings and regain a sense of calm.

Emotional regulation is an important component in the broader skill of self-regulation.

Self-Regulation enables us to:

- ▶ Focus and refocus on tasks when needed.
- ▶ Adjust our state of arousal or alertness to suit our current situation.
- ▶ Manage our own behaviour and impulses.
- ▶ Understand what others are feeling and how our behaviour impacts on others.
- ▶ Get along with others.

Other components of self-regulation include sensory processing and executive functioning.

## Sensory Processing

Sensory processing refers to the way the brain receives, organises, and responds to sensory input.

Please refer to the Sensory Processing Guidebook in this series for more information about this aspect of self-regulation.





# Executive Functioning

Executive functioning refers to the cognitive processes involved in managing our thoughts and actions. It is made up of three cognitive processes:

- 1. Working memory:** This is the ability to keep information in mind and then use it in some way, such as planning and executing a task.
- 2. Cognitive flexibility:** This is the ability to think about something in more than one way.
- 3. Inhibitory control (self-control):** The ability to ignore distractions and resist temptation.

When all these cognitive processes function adequately, children are able to:

- ▶ Problem solve and persevere through challenges.
  - *Seena runs out of blocks before she has finished building her city. She looks around the environment and then collects two buckets from the sand pit to add to her city to complete her buildings.*
- ▶ Pay attention to important information in the environment.
  - *Deepu is able to listen to the educator read a story, without being distracted by the ceiling fan spinning overhead, the sound of a bus driving by outside or another educator wiping down the tables.*
- ▶ Organise and plan tasks.
  - *Alfie wants to ride trikes with Mohamed. He asks Mohamed to come outside with him. They need to remember to go to their lockers, get their hats, and apply sunscreen before going outside.*
- ▶ Begin tasks and stay focused until completed.
  - *The painting station has been set up for the day. Sun Lee would like to paint a picture for her dad. Before she can begin, she needs to decide which colours she wants to use and what marks she wants to make.*
- ▶ Keep track of what they are doing.
  - *Educator, Mitchell asks Salome to wash his hands before morning tea. Salome goes to the bathroom to wash his hands. When he leaves the bathroom he begins to follow his friend Kyla to the sandpit, but then remembers that it's time for morning tea.*
- ▶ Control impulses and wait for gratification.
  - *Venus' favourite activity at preschool is the slide. Today, however, Simeon and Kalif have covered the slide in blankets to build a star ship. Venus begins to remove the sheet so she can use the slide. Educator, Fatima asks her to leave the sheet there while the boys are playing in their star ship, assuring her that she will be able to use the slide later in the day.*



# Strategies – Executive Functioning

## Visual supports

Visual schedules, routine sequences and visual flow charts can help children to start and complete tasks, organise, plan and execute tasks and activities. Visuals can be added to verbal prompts and directions. This allows children to take their time to process the information provided in the visual.

## Forewarning

Providing children with notice of changes or expectations allows them time to cognitively plan for what is coming. This is also very helpful for supporting children's impulse control.

## Modelling and Self-talk

Educators can intentionally model executive functioning skills. You can enhance the benefits of modelling by combining it with self-talk about what you are doing, e.g. *"I've washed my hands....What do I need to do next? Oh yes! I need to find my hand towel to dry my hands."*

## Task Analysis

This involves breaking down a task into sequential steps. Breaking down tasks helps children to begin and complete tasks and keep track of what they are doing. Communicating the steps needed to complete a task in a visual flow chart provides even more support.

## Forward or backward chaining

Once a task has been broken down into steps, educators can scaffold a child to be successful in the task, by helping the child to complete some of the steps. This can be done through either forward or backward chaining.

In forward chaining, the child is encouraged to attempt the first step independently, the educator provides specific praise for this, and then completes the rest of the steps in the task. An example of forward chaining could be helping children to do up their shoelaces. The child could be supported to complete the first step of crossing the two laces, and the educator can complete the rest of the task, while the child observes and learns. When the child is ready, they can be encouraged to complete the next step i.e. cross, under and pull.

In backward chaining, the educator completes the initial steps and then encourages the child to complete the final step independently. As the child masters this one step, they are encouraged to attempt the previous one. An example of backward chaining could be helping a child to do up a zipper on a jacket. The educator would complete the more challenging part of the task of connecting the two sides of the zip, and the child could complete the final part of the task by pulling the zip up to the top.

The scaffolding can be gradually reduced until the child can complete the whole task independently. Self-talk is especially powerful during forward and backward chaining.

## Play

Play can be a great way of intentionally supporting the development of all executive functioning skills, especially cognitive flexibility. Pretend play enables children to safely experiment with alternative ways of thinking, e.g. objects being used to represent other items etc. Educators and peers can be important models for flexible thinking during play.

## Safety Breath

Encouraging children to take a moment to stop and breathe before responding to a situation can support them to develop inhibitory control skills. In this moment they can consider how they are feeling, why they are feeling that way, what they would like to have happen and the best way to respond to improve the situation. Inhibitory control is a sophisticated skill for young children to develop and is likely to take time. Don't forget to model the use of safety breaths in your own responses to challenging situations.





# Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness is the capacity to identify, label and understand the emotions of self and others. It is an awareness that how we feel can vary in intensity and duration.

Many children will naturally develop emotional awareness over time as they grow, play and communicate with those around them, however children with additional needs or limited opportunities (such as children with trauma or other complex histories) may need more explicit, intentional teaching to develop this complex skill. All children can benefit from support around this area of development.

For children to develop emotional awareness they need to learn how to:

- ▶ Identify emotions
- ▶ Rate the intensity of emotions
- ▶ Express emotions

Educators can use a range of opportunities, both spontaneous and planned, to help children notice their own feelings and those of others and develop language around these. When educators label children's emotions in a tentative way, children begin to learn the terms used to identify how they, and others, feel. For example, an educator seeing a child crying might say *"I think Johnny looks sad"*.



# Emotional Understanding

Emotional understanding involves children developing more complex concepts about the nature of feelings and how emotions are impacted by external factors and, in turn, how feelings impact on people internally. Emotions are complex and nuanced.

The key elements of emotional understanding that children need to develop include an awareness that:

- ▶ External events trigger emotions
- ▶ Multiple emotions can be felt at the same time
- ▶ Emotions effect our bodies

Triggers can be anything that affect a person's thoughts and emotional responses either positively or negatively. Examples could include sensory factors (light, sound, movement, touch); social situations (rules or expectations such as transitions; disagreements with others; unfamiliar situations; surprises or connection with others) or physical factors (heat or cold; hunger or thirst, or provision of, food or water; lack of, or provision of, physical affection).

Emotions are not always discreet; several emotions can be felt at the same time (for example a person may feel tired, sad and angry or happy and surprised, simultaneously). Children need to develop an understanding of this to fully express themselves and respond well to the emotions of those around them.

When emotions are felt, they may have an impact both physiologically and physically within the body.

The physical and physiological responses are the automatic reactions triggered within the nervous system by the stimulus (for example increased heart rate, pupils dilating, decreased digestive activity, sweating). Whilst physical reactions refer to impacts on the body, physiological responses refer to impacts on the body's functions (Kenneth, 2021).

# Strategies - Emotional awareness and Understanding

## Name it!

Being able to name emotions is an important aspect of awareness and understanding emotions. It is important to embed this practice into our interactions with children throughout the day. When a child is distressed, they are unlikely to learn and remember, so it is best not to try to teach emotion concepts at the height of the emotion. Commenting on our own feelings, what emotions we observe in the child, what emotions we observe in other children, and through sharing media such as picture books. It is important to comment on the full range of emotions.

## Identifying triggers

For young children, understanding why they are feeling what they are feeling may not be as easy as it seems. Just as we can be feeling more than one thing at a time, we can also be reacting to more than one trigger at a time. E.g., a child might be simultaneously feeling excited because it is Christmas but grumpy because they woke up too early in the morning.

Educators need to try to understand what might be causing a child to feel the way they do. This then can enable educators to eliminate or reduce the child's exposure to that trigger, or to forewarn, prepare and support the child to respond in an increasingly regulated way. Educators can also help children to reflect on the causes of their feelings as a way to increase their emotional awareness and understanding.

## Visual supports

Visual supports can help children to learn about facial expressions they observe in others when emotions are being felt, as well as how their own facial expressions may appear to others. Images showing faces expressing different emotions with their corresponding labels, or intensity rating scales, can assist children to identify, rate and express their feelings.

Example of an emotion rating scale:

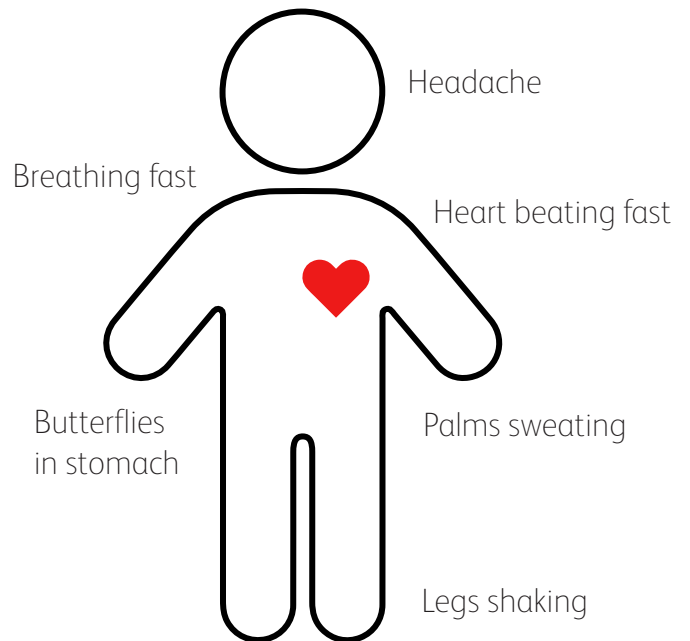




## Body Mapping

This is a visual tool to assist children to develop key elements of emotional understanding. Educators can support children to observe and record the physical and physiological changes they and others experience internally and externally when various emotions are felt.

The example opposite depicts a body map showing possible physiological responses to anxiety or fear.



## Story Telling

By using children's books (including customised social stories) as a stimulus, educators can expose children to a variety of scenarios they may not have encountered. Reading stories about emotional situations while children are calm and engaged can help them to understand concepts cognitively. Children are more likely to process the concepts in a story, because the situation is non-threatening and their emotions are not heightened (in contrast to when they are in the heat of the moment, in a real-life scenario).

## Role playing

Role playing has similar benefits to story-telling, with the advantage of being more concrete. Educators are able to emphasise and show children some of the physical and physiological signs they may notice in people's body language or may experience within themselves. Examples are the heart beating fast, having sweaty palms and looking tense in their body when they are scared.

# Arousal States

Arousal states refer to a child's level of alertness at a particular point in time. It is normal and healthy for children to move between different arousal states throughout the day. While a child's level of alertness lies along a continuum, it can be helpful to think of 4 different states of arousal.

- ▶ Low arousal is when a child is feeling tired, lethargic, bored, sick or sad. A low level of arousal is beneficial when it is time to rest and sleep, but can limit participation when it is time for the child to play and learn.
- ▶ Moderate or optimal arousal is when a child is feeling calm and focused. This state is ideal for learning through low energy play and interactions, like reading, table play, imaginative and creative play. It is also ideal for structured adult-led activities like group time.
- ▶ High arousal is when a child is feeling extra alert or slightly heightened. This could be from feelings of excitement and anticipation and is suitable when engaging in active play. A high level of arousal can also be caused by feelings of frustration, fear, confusion and anger.

When experiencing a high level of arousal, children may seem distracted, agitated, stressed and over-active. When a child is in a state of high arousal, they may need help to be able to identify what they are feeling, why they are feeling the way they are and how they can constructively express these feelings. It is important for educators to identify when children are in a state of high arousal and support them to regulate and regain a sense of calm. This can help to prevent the child escalating into a state of hyper-arousal.

- ▶ Hyper-arousal can occur if feelings of fear, anxiety, anger or panic overwhelm a child. When a child is hyper-aroused, their 'flight or fight' survival instincts control their brain. Until they are able to regulate their emotions and feel calmer, they will not be able to concentrate, reason or learn. Some children will be more susceptible to experiencing hyper-arousal more frequently than others.

One approach to help children to understand their own arousal states is the 'Zones of Regulation' program (Kuypers, 2011).



# Strategies - Arousal State Regulation

## **Movement**

Movement can be a great way to increase the arousal of a child who is in a low arousal state, moving from low energy movement to high energy movement. Conversely children who need support to reducing their arousal could benefit from using some high energy movement to burn some tension from their bodies and then transitioning to low energy movement such as stretching or yoga to move into an optimal arousal state for learning.

## **Breathing**

Deep breathing is a great way to reduce the stress hormones in the body and help children to feel calm. This can be done playfully through activities like blowing pinwheels, bubbles or balloons, or roaring like a lion.

## **Non-verbal support**

Non-verbal supports can include proximity (remaining close to a child who is feeling overwhelmed so that they can feel safe), calming body language (lowered gaze; slow, calm movements; deep, slow breathing) and touch (hugging, hand-holding, patting or stroking).

## **Sensory input or reduction**

Sensory input can have a huge impact on children's arousal levels. Sensory input, such as calming music or dim lighting, may help to lower a child's level of arousal. Other input such as loud noises or bright lights often heighten arousal. The way that each person processes sensory input is individual, i.e. touch that feels soothing to one person may feel highly irritating to another.

It is very important to try to understand the way that each child is responding to sensory input when considering how this strategy can be used to help them regulate. For more information on sensory processing and regulation see the Sensory Processing Guidebook.

## **Environment**

In addition to considering the sensory stimulation in the preschool, other environmental factors can influence children's arousal levels. Educators should ensure that there are spaces available for children at all energy and arousal levels at all times. When reflecting on the daily routine, consider how children are supported to calm down from active play before being expected to focus on sedentary activities.



# Security and Attachment

One significant cause of hyper-arousal is when a child's brain perceives a threat or danger. Children who have experienced past trauma or fear are susceptible to this reaction. The danger does not need to be real for the child's brain to react in a protective fight or flight response. E.g. a child who has been in a car accident might have a fearful reaction to the sound of a siren in the distance; a child who has experienced domestic violence might be triggered by a raised voice or even an adult with what they perceive to be using threatening body language such as their hands on their hips. When fear is causing a child to be dis-regulated, it is essential to ensure that they feel safe and secure.

The primary source of security for young children is the attachments that they form with responsive and reliable adults in their lives. For most children, their first and most important attachments are with their parents or primary caregivers. The feeling of security that children have from knowing that they are cared for and protected by this adult gives them confidence to try new things and take risks, knowing that if anything upsetting occurs, they have a safe place to return to. This person also becomes a trusted source of information about safety and emotions. If the child hears a loud clap of thunder and gets frightened, but the adult they are securely attached to is unconcerned, then the child learns that thunder is not a threat to their safety, even if it feels that way. When the adult validates a child's feelings and models/supports them to express the emotion ("I can see that you are sad. It's ok to cry when you're sad. I will stay with you until you are feeling happier"), the child learns the skills of emotional awareness and understanding. Secure attachments are an integral piece of the

emotional regulation puzzle. Children who have not been able to form and maintain secure attachments with a parent or caregiver from infancy are likely to have much more difficulty regulating their emotions and behaviour.

When children are at preschool their parents and caregivers are not available to help them feel safe and secure. It is important, therefore, that they also have secure attachments to adults in the preschool environment. Thinking about how relationships between educators and children are nurtured in your setting is crucial to supporting children's emotional regulation.

Predictability and consistency are other ways that we can provide children with a feeling of security in the preschool setting. When children know what to expect of their day at preschool, their brains do not have to become overly alert, watching out for shocks or surprises. Likewise, when they know what is expected in the preschool setting, they can relax and focus on learning and participating, rather than being on the lookout for cues that they are displeasing someone or are about to 'get into trouble'.

Giving children some choice and agency can make them feel a sense of control, enhancing feelings of safety and security. Finding the balance between choice and predictability requires educators to be continually reflecting on their program, ensuring that each child is receiving the support that they need to feel safe, in control and ready to learn.

## Strategies - Security and Attachment

### Routines

Daily routines can be an important source of predictability for children. This does not mean, however, that all children must follow the same routine at the same time. Routines can be both predictable and flexible. Ensuring that children are consistently forewarned of changes before they occur in the routine, can provide both predictability and a sense of agency throughout the day.

### Rituals

While routine times can often feel rushed and forced, rituals can feel comforting and peaceful. By being intentional about how routines are conducted, they can be transformed into rituals that are positive for educators and children to participate in. Creating spaces with sensory input in mind can help turn routines into rituals e.g. when children come to the lunch table, what do they see, hear, smell, and feel (tactile)? Rituals can be something that children participate in together, such as a daily Acknowledgement of Country, or routine pack away song, or something that is individualised, such as a holding their favourite teddy while leaning through the fence for a kiss from Dad as he leaves in the morning.

### Circle of Security® Program

This is an attachment theory-based parenting program designed to teach parents how to support their child's social and emotional development through strong attachments, emotional validation and co-regulation. Some of the key messages of the program are that children need adults who can be the secure base from which to explore the world and the safe haven to return to when they need comfort. Adults should share the child's emotional experiences

with them, being happy and excited for them in their exploration, and being understanding and comforting when they are feeling an unhappy or difficult emotion. The program states that children need their trusted adults to be 'Bigger, Stronger, Wiser and Kind' (The Circle of Security International, 2019).

### Playspaces®

This is another attachment theory-based program that specifically looks at how attachment theory can be integrated into early childhood practice. The idea behind Playspaces® is to support educators to be still and located in a consistent 'playspace', particularly during the busy transition times of drop off and pick up. This supports the children to feel welcomed, seen and not overwhelmed, and the educators to have more chance to experience how the children access them for relationship support, and more capacity to be predictable and emotionally available (Secure Beginnings, 2021).

[Training in both the Circle of Security® and Playspaces® programs is available to educators who would like to learn more.](#)

# Perspective-taking and Empathy

Understanding the feelings and perspectives of other people, and how they influence this, is an important part of self-regulation development for children. Using this understanding to behave empathetically is an important part of getting along with other people and maintaining positive relationships. This is a complex skill that may not come easily to all children.

There are a number of underlying skills that children need to be supported to learn before we can expect them to understand the perspectives of others and behave empathetically.

Children need:

- ▶ Social attention skills. This means noticing and paying attention to other people,
- ▶ To be aware of the range of typical emotions people have and,
- ▶ To understand that not all people will feel the same way at the same time or under the same circumstances.

Once children can consider the perspectives of others, they can begin to develop empathy. That is, they can think about what it might be like to be that person, experiencing that situation and they can learn to care about the other person's feelings. Empathy enables children to be able to get along with others, by providing an intrinsic rationale for controlling their own ego-centric impulses.





# Strategies - Perspective taking and Empathy

## Encourage social attention strategies

Noticing and paying attention to others may not come naturally to all children. Educators are able to teach and encourage social attention and awareness from a very young age. Games and activities that encourage children to notice, look at and name other people can be very helpful for children that need support in this area. These activities might include handing out items, such as meals or hats to peers, choosing a friend for an activity or mirroring games like 'Punchinello' or 'Simon Says'. It is also helpful to intentionally draw a child's attention to others in a variety of social situations 'Look at the tall tower Tia has built.' 'Hussain's face looks very red. I wonder if he is feeling hot in his jumper. I'll ask him if he wants to take it off.'

## Modelling

Be intentional about modelling empathic behaviour towards children and adults. Use self-talk while modelling e.g. "Kui is sitting by himself, and his face looks sad. Maybe he is missing his mum. I wonder if I could help him feel better by sitting beside him for a little while."

## Validating feelings

When modelling and encouraging empathy, it is important that we continue to validate children's feelings. We need to be careful that our words and actions do not send the message to children that feelings like sadness or anger need to be 'fixed'. We can do this by letting children know that it is ok to feel the way that they feel and that our goal is to support them through their feelings rather than trying to pull them out of the emotions they are feeling.

## Use 'I' messages

Talking about our own emotions and experiences is a great way to help children develop the

skill of perspective-taking. Phrasing used in an 'I-message' puts the emphasis on the person's feelings, rather than on blaming the other person e.g. "when you don't share the blocks, I feel sad" instead of "you never share - you're mean!". We can help children learn to express themselves using 'I-messages' by paraphrasing their expressions back to them in this format and using this way of communicating ourselves.

## Apologies and 'Do-overs'

While learning to say sorry is an important social skill, it is only meaningful if children understand what the words really mean, how their words or actions have impacted on others and how to take responsibility for their own behaviour. Saying "sorry" can potentially become a way of mitigating responsibility and dismissing the feelings of others. Along with encouraging children to apologise, educators can support children to take action to redress the impact of their behaviour, such as providing comfort to a person who is upset, or repairing damage that has been done. If the circumstances are appropriate, children can also be given an opportunity for a 'do-over'. With educator support and scaffolding they can attempt the interaction a second time. This gives children a positive, reinforcing experience of being successful in the situation.

## Role play

Planned or spontaneous role-playing gives children an opportunity to practice considering the perspective of others and responding empathetically, without the pressure of being in an emotionally-charged situation.

## Books and other resources

There are many books, songs, videos etc. that have messages about empathy. Encourage children to talk about what they can learn from these resources.

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## KU Children's Services

129 York Street Sydney NSW 2000  
Box Q132 QVB Post Office NSW 1230  
T 02 9264 8366

For more information and to contact the KU Sector Capacity Building Team visit: [www.kudisabilityinclusion.com.au](http://www.kudisabilityinclusion.com.au)

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