

Emotional Regulation in Young Children

What is Self Regulation?

Self-regulation is a skill that helps children manage their emotions and behaviour in different situations. It's what allows them to stay calm when they're upset, handle frustration, and adjust when plans change. These skills take time to develop, especially in the early years and that's perfectly normal. As parents and carers, you can support this growth by helping children recognise and understand their feelings. When we guide and comfort them through big emotions, we're practising co-regulation, which lays the foundation for strong self-regulation later on.

The Limbic Brain

Behaviour is one of the main ways children communicate, especially when they're still learning to express their feelings with words. When our little ones are having a hard time, it helps to pause and consider what might be happening in their brains and what they're trying to tell us through their actions. Young children are still developing the parts of the brain that help them manage emotions, so they often react from the limbic system. The "fight, flight, or freeze" part of the brain. In these moments, our role is to guide them back to a calm state. In the early years, we like to call this "chilling the chimp."



Step one:

Support your child to develop an awareness of their emotions

Helping our children to understand their emotions is the first, crucial step. Research shows that children who can understand their emotions tend to build stronger friendships, settle more easily when upset, do better at school, think more positively, and handle their emotions more effectively. That's why it's so important to nurture this understanding from an early age. **Here are some ways you can support this at home:**

Be attuned to your child:

Pay attention to small changes in their body language, facial expressions, and posture. These can give you clues about how they're feeling.

Label their emotions:

When you notice a feeling, name it: "I think you're feeling happy," or "You look a bit sad." This is called emotion labelling and it's an important step in helping children understand their own emotions.

Use emotional language at home:

Talk about feelings together as a family- emotions affect everyone, not just children! Naming emotions like happy, sad, or calm helps your child learn to recognise and express what they're experiencing.

Try fun, everyday activities:

- Use mirrors to explore expressions. While your child brushes their teeth or makes funny faces, talk about what those faces might mean.
- Use puppets or toy role play. Act out situations with puppets or toys and discuss how each character might feel.



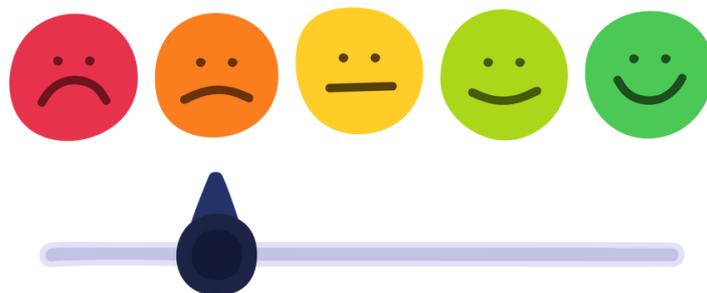
Step two:

Help your child to identify their Emotions

Once children have developed a strong understanding of emotions and the language to express them, we can begin supporting them to recognise their own feelings. When they are able to identify their emotions, they are one step closer to learning how to manage and regulate them effectively.

Ideas for supporting this at home:

- **Label emotions as you notice them.** Linking the feeling to the physical response. For example: “I think you’re feeling happy because you’re smiling,” or “I think you’re feeling cross because you’re shouting.”
- **Make it fun with chalk drawings.** Draw around your child’s body outside with chalk, then choose an emotion together. On the outline, draw or label what might happen in their body when they feel that way. For example, a fast heartbeat for excitement or crossed arms for anger.
- **Read stories with emotional themes.** When reading books together, pause to discuss how the characters might be feeling and why. Ask questions such as, “How do you think she feels right now?” or “What made him feel that way?”
- **Use emotion pictures.** Provide your child with a range of pictures showing different emotions. Encourage them to pick one that shows how they’re feeling. Do this regularly, not just when your child seems upset, to help them build confidence in expressing emotions.
- **Model your own emotions.** Talk openly about your feelings in a calm, age-appropriate way. For example, “I felt a bit frustrated when I couldn’t find my keys, so I took a deep breath to calm down.” This helps children learn that everyone has emotions and that they can be managed.



Step three:

Encourage your child to manage and regulate their Emotions

In this final step, we can begin to guide our children in learning to manage their emotions. It's important to remember that in the early years, these skills are still developing, and children will continue to need plenty of adult guidance and co-regulation. When children are responding from the limbic part of the brain- the emotional centre they need lots of opportunities to 'calm their inner chimp' and return to a more settled state.

Tips for supporting this at home:

- **Create a calm or cosy corner.** Give your child a quiet, comfortable space to go when they feel overwhelmed- perhaps a small tent, a den under the bed, or a spot behind the sofa. Remember, when emotions are high, children may not be ready to talk; focus on helping them feel calm first.
- **Try calming or mindfulness activities.** A 'calm box' with items such as bubbles, a soft toy, colouring materials, or breathing cards can help your child relax and refocus.
- **Include sensory play.** Activities like messy play, using playdough, Lego, resistance bands, or gentle physical movement can support emotional regulation. Weighted blankets or toys may also be comforting.
- **Practise calming techniques together.** Try simple breathing exercises such as 'smell the flower, blow out the candle' or short stretches to help your child settle.
- **Spend time outdoors.** Fresh air, movement, and nature all help children feel more balanced and relaxed.

Key Points to Remember:

A child's emotional age may not always match their chronological age.

In the early years, children will need lots of guidance and co-regulation. This is dependent on their stage of development.

Name a wide range of emotions, to help build a rich emotional vocabulary. Not just angry, sad etc.

Developing emotional awareness and self-regulation is a gradual process. It takes time, patience, and consistent support.