What is Emotional Regulation?

Emotional regulation is an awareness and understanding of one’s emotions and their impact on behavior, and the ability to manage those emotions in a positive way.

Why is Emotional Regulation Important?

Our ability to regulate emotions

- Helps us calm down during times of high emotion and control negative urges during times of emotional distress.
- Helps prevent depression, aggression, and other emotional states or behaviors that could be dangerous to ourselves or others.
- Is important for mental health, academic achievement and positive social relationships, which are crucial skills for success in life.

Children with healthy emotional regulation skills

- Are able to experience, express and manage a range of emotions.
- Engage in appropriate behaviors in response to emotional situations.
- Adjust well to transitions and new situations & show a high tolerance for frustration.

Children with poor emotional regulation skills

- May exhibit a limited range of emotions.
- Have difficulties coping with stressful experiences, resulting in outbursts of negative emotions, aggression or ego-centric behavior dependent on age.
- Are less socially competent and are often less successful in school, where they have difficulty learning and are less productive.

What Causes Poor Emotional Regulation?

Poor attachment

- Requires children to fall back on crudely developed regulation strategies, since children often need the help of the adults in their lives to develop regulation skills.

Exposure to trauma

- Children learn to disconnect from their physical and emotional experiences when those experiences are too painful or overwhelming.
- Sharing feelings may not be safe or acceptable.
- Children may be unable to tell whether situations are safe, causing them to respond in order to keep themselves safe even when there is no real danger.
- Children become increasingly unable to build safe relationships or effectively manage their emotions.
What Can Be Done?

- Model healthy emotional regulation, practicing repair as needed when your emotions get out of control.
- Help children think about ways they can manage their emotions in situations where they might feel out of control.
- Practice regulation skills with children.
- Encourage healthy outlets for physical and emotional energy, such as exercise, creative activities or hobbies.
- Create consistency and use routines to help avoid meltdowns (see subsections on Rules, Routines, Rituals and Transitions in this toolkit).

Practical tools for emotional regulation

- Encourage deep breathing exercises.
- Practice Crossing the Midline activity (see explanation at right).
- Pop bubbles with only one hand.
- Play flashlight tag. In a dimmed room, have children follow your flashlight beam projected onto the wall with their own flashlight.
- Encourage babies to crawl.
- Have older children write their name in the air while rotating the opposite foot clockwise.
- Exercise…anything that gets children’s hearts pumping.

MORE INFORMATION

Creative relaxation ideas for kids
From Zemirah Jazwierska via kidsrelaxation.com
All Relaxation Activities (kids)
Reading this in print? Go to: http://kidsrelaxation.com/?cat=9

Belly Breathe with Elmo
From Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) Sesame Street series via YouTube Sesame Street: Common and Colbie Caillat- “Belly Breathe” with Elmo
Reading this in print? Go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mZbzDOPylA

Teaching kids how to belly breathe
From fit web platform (WebMD and Sanford Health) Belly Breathing
Reading this in print? Go to: http://fit.webmd.com/jr/recharge/article/belly-breathing-activity

Relaxation Thermometer with Instructions
From the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning Relaxation Thermometer

Games to Help with Emotional Regulation