

Helping Your Child Manage Their Emotions



Emotions are a big part of life—for kids and adults. They influence how we think, behave, and interact with others.

Children, however, are just beginning to understand the complicated world of emotions. They're learning how to manage and regulate their feelings. Here's how you can help.

Why emotional regulation matters

Emotional regulation means controlling or influencing the way we express our emotions. Think of a thermostat. If it's too hot, you can use the thermostat to cool things down. Emotional regulation is like turning the thermostat up or down inside yourself.

Children who learn to regulate their emotions can handle disappointments better, calm themselves down when they're excited or upset, and cheer themselves up when they're feeling low. They're also more likely to have better focus in school, healthier relationships, and higher self-esteem.

What emotional regulation looks like

Here's an example of how a child might regulate their emotions:

Anna is playing a board game with her family. She is about to win when her younger brother suddenly beats her and wins the game. She feels very frustrated and disappointed. Instead of lashing out or pouting, she takes a deep breath and says, "Good game! You really surprised me there!"

Anna regulated her emotions by:

- Recognizing what she was feeling
- Taking time to breathe
- Choosing a positive response

This example makes it seem easy, but it's not! It takes skill and practice for both the child and parent to do what Anna did.

Some important skills to teach your child

As a parent, you can help your child learn these skills so they can do it, too. Here's how:

- **Validate their feelings.** Make sure your child knows that having feelings is natural and OK. If your child is upset because they lost a game, say something like, "I understand why you're upset. Losing a game can feel disappointing."
- **Identify the emotion.** Encourage your child to name what they're feeling. This helps them become aware of their emotions. Knowing when you're having a feeling is the first step to managing them. If your child is acting out because they're jealous of a sibling, you could say, "It seems like you might be feeling jealous. Is that right?"
- **Teach coping strategies.** Once your child can identify their feelings, show them different ways to handle those emotions. If they're angry, they could take a few deep breaths or walk away from the situation. If they're sad, they might find comfort in a hug, a favorite toy, or drawing a picture.
- **Model emotional regulation.** Show your child how you manage your emotions. If you're feeling frustrated, you might say, "I'm feeling frustrated right now, so I'm going to slowly count down from 10 to help myself calm down."

- **Create a “calm down corner.”** Designate a place in your home where your child can go to calm down when they’re feeling overwhelmed. It could be a quiet space with a cozy chair or pillows, a few favorite books, and calming items like stress balls, stuffed animals, or soft blankets.
- **Practice problem-solving.** If your child is upset about a problem they’re facing, help them come up with solutions. Maybe they’re upset because they don’t want to share their favorite toy with a friend. You could say, “I understand you don’t want to share your toy. Let’s think of some ways to solve this problem. What if you take turns playing with the toy? What other ideas might work?” Be sure to ask your child how they feel and reflect on how the solution worked out afterwards.
- **Have consistent check-ins.** Ask your child about their feelings. Make talking about emotions a normal part of your family’s routine.
- **Get support.** If your child’s having continuous trouble regulating their emotions, try talking with a psychologist or mental health provider. Their school might have someone to talk with, too, like a counselor.

Start early, and ask for help

Emotional regulation is a skill that takes time to develop. Be patient with your child (and yourself). If you were never exposed to such parenting strategies as a child or young adult, and these skills are hard for you to use, ask for help. School psychologists and counselors can provide information and support as you learn and practice new parenting skills. The goal isn’t to eliminate negative emotions, but to teach your child how to handle them in a positive way.

By elementary school, most children can manage “big” emotions. But their emotional development will continue well into young adulthood. Don’t expect your child to be perfectly under control. Be ready to offer significant emotional support during stressful situations, no matter their age.

Giving your child tools to manage their feelings will help them for the rest of their life.

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