



Handout 10

The development of emotional regulation in children

Babies are often born with different temperaments and although they are not born with the ability to speak, they do have the ability to communicate their feelings without words.

When they are born they can find everything overwhelming and it can be a stressful time: imagine having the experience of seeing lights, hearing noise, having a soggy nappy, having a tummy upset – all for the first time! It can feel all too much and out of proportion. Imagine also not being able to tell someone with words what is going on.

Babies rely on their caregivers to do the thinking for them and to work out their needs and what is going on for them emotionally.

Parents or caregivers then have the very important job of listening to and recognising the different signals and clues their baby is giving out. There can be different types of crying, for example hunger, boredom, loneliness – and it can take a while for parents/caregivers to recognise and get to know the different sounds.

Responding repeatedly to the different emotional states in the baby through soothing and comforting and talking to the baby about his/her feelings helps the baby to calm down. In time, as the baby gets older, the baby begins to recognise his/her own feelings and emotions. This is sometimes called *emotional regulation*.

Children who are able to understand and regulate their emotions because these have been valued and taken care of by their parents or carers do better in life. They are more able to focus and achieve better at school. They become adept at sorting out problems with their friends and are more caring towards others.