**Managing Feelings and Emotional Regulation**



We all experience situations in life which elicit emotional responses, whether this is being unable to do something, someone speaking to us in a way we don’t like, or other scenarios.  In such situations, we need to be able to manage our emotions and respond in a way that doesn’t make things worse.

Sometimes, children are not able to manage their ‘big emotions’, resulting in a meltdown or explosion either in the classroom or at home, which can then lead to further distress caused by sanctions or other negative consequences.  Often, these sanctions do not teach the child coping strategies and just make the situation worse. One possible reason for this disruptive behaviour is poor self-regulation, so it can be helpful to look at what might be going on and what we can do to help.

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage your emotions and behaviour in response to things happening around you. It helps you to control your impulses (to make better decisions), to not over-react when upset or excited, and to be able to calm down after an incident, should one occur

**Why is self-regulation important?**

Managing our feelings and emotions is vital, as our ability to do so can affect our lives in so many ways. Not only can it affect our physical, emotional and social wellbeing but also our academic achievement; research shows that young children with poor self-regulation skills tend to make less academic progress (McClelland et al., 2007).

Self-regulation can affect physical wellbeing by boosting healthy brain development, as well as overall better health outcomes, such as reduced incidents of heart disease, obesity and drug dependency.

Emotionally, self-regulation helps nurture a more positive sense of self, as well as the ability to cope better with stress, which is particularly important given the increasing levels of mental health issues in children.

Socially, it is beneficial for social skills that affect friendships and getting along with others and can affect the teacher-pupil relationship.

All this can lead to more success at school and throughout life.



**Why do some children struggle to self-regulate?**

There are many reasons why some children find it harder to self-regulate than others, including:

* Adverse childhood experiences (ACE’s) in early life, such as being adopted or looked after. ACEs may include prolonged stressful events, poverty, or other traumatic experiences.
* Children who have additional needs, e.g. social communication difficulties, ADHD or sensory processing difficulties.
* Temperament – some children are more reactive than others.
* Physical needs not being met, e.g. hungry or tired

It is important to note that poor self-regulation can be displayed through externalising (shouting and screaming) or internalising behaviours (being withdrawn).  Be mindful of the fact that internal behaviours are not always obvious, as they are directed inward.

**What can we do to help?**

Fortunately, self-regulation is something that can be learned with help and support from caregivers, so whether you are a teacher or a parent, you can play a very important role in helping children learn to self-regulate. Children do not learn to self-regulate on their own, and at first their behaviour is driven by impulses, as we see in toddler tantrums!  We need to find teachable moments to help children learn to self-regulate by using co-regulation and skills instruction, as well as practice (and plenty of praise when they try to manage their feelings).

**Strategies**

 **Modelling**

* It is important for adults to regulate their own emotion before addressing their child’s
* Even if emotions are rising inside, it is important to present a calm front to the child, as we will not be as effective
* Children are perceptive observers of adults and will be learning form how we manage our own emotions

**Co-regulate**

* Co-regulate by providing a warm, responsive relationship with the child/young person, which will in turn, teach them skills to self-regulate
* To co-regulate effectively, you need to get alongside the child/young person in their time of distress, reassure them and acknowledge their feelings, using a soothing voice and calm manner.  It’s important to focus on the emotion and not on the behaviour (i.e. the anger rather than the swearing).

**Use empathy**

* Use empathy to acknowledge a child’s feelings
* Don’t dismiss feelings – they are so important!

**Talk about emotions**

* Find opportunities to talk about the range of emotions we all experience – how we all experience different feelings, it’s normal and it’s how we manage them that’s important.  Use story books, songs or games to make it fun

**Games**

There are a number of games to help children learn self-regulation skills which involve waiting and turn-taking and provide a fun way of teaching impulse-control:

* Red Light – Green Light. The children run around freely – when ‘Red light’ is called out, they freeze – when ‘Green light’ is called out, they run.  Swap it round so they have to go against their impulses.
* Musical Statues – when the music stops, they must freeze. Also in reverse.
* Follow my Clap – clap a rhythm and get the children to copy it.
* Body Part Mix-up – get children to touch a series of body parts i.e. head, toes, knees. Then replace one of the body parts, so when you say ‘toes’ they must touch their ears.  This gets them not to just act instinctively.

**Calming down ideas for children to try:**

* Counting backwards – in your head
* Clench and relax your muscles
* Walk away (if safe to do so)
* Go outside and kick a ball
* Find a quiet place to be
* Close your eyes and think of a calm place
* Stretch your hand out like a star and use your pointy finger to trace your fingers up and down, slide up each finger slowly and slide down the other side, breath in through your nose and out through your mouth as you do it
* Squeeze a teddy or pillow tightly
* Listen to music
* Ask for a hug

**Books and resources that may be helpful:**

*What to Do When Your Temper Flares – by Dawn Huebner*

*I Hate Everything – by Sue Graves*

*Starving the Anger Gremlin – by Kate Collins-Donnelly*

*The Kids Guide to Staying Awesome and in Control – by Lauren Brukner*

*Relaxation and mindful techniques and stories*

 