

# How self-regulation difficulties affect children

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Parents contribute in many ways to children's ability to regulate emotions.

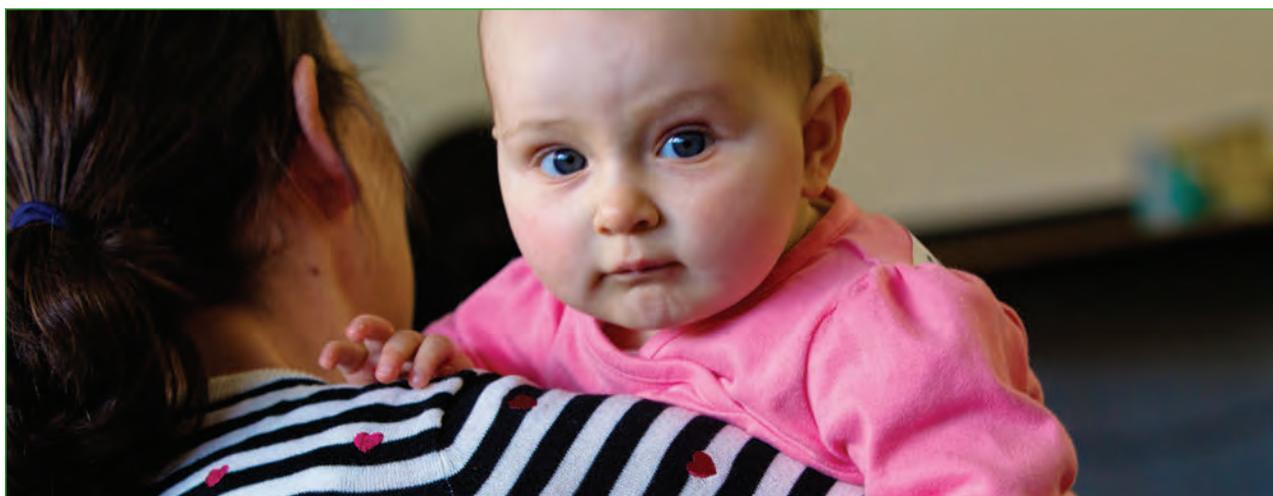
## Keeping a balance: Managing feelings and behaviours

Children experience ups and downs when they are trying to manage their feelings and behaviours. Helping them find ways to balance this is called self-regulation.

## Explaining self-regulation

As part of life, children are exposed to new events and experiences such as their first day at childcare, moving house or the birth of a sibling. Babies and young children may be frightened and upset by these new experiences and express their distress in a number of ways such as crying, withdrawing, bedwetting or clingy behaviour. When parents and carers respond in a caring way, for example, with a calm tone of voice, holding, rocking and gentle touch, children learn they can feel comfortable and safe again. They learn others will be available to help them notice and understand their feelings and behaviours and provide comfort when needed. Parents and carers act like an 'emotion coach' and with their help, children can learn to regulate their feelings and behaviours. Being able to manage feelings and behaviours is called self-regulation.

Emotional and behavioural self-regulation contributes to young children's growing independence. It is this growing ability to control their own feelings and behaviour that eventually allows a child to become more skilled in their relationships with children and adults, for example, when playing together or making decisions together. In the preschool years, children's self-regulation skills are still developing and can often go up and down. Being able to consistently regulate their own feelings and behaviour is a major task for a young child. By school age, children become more flexible and are better at regulating their own emotions and actions. When children learn to self-regulate they have stronger friendships and relationships with others, are more able to pay attention and learn new things and deal better with the normal stresses and disappointments of daily life.



## How does self-regulation develop?

Sensitive and comforting care from warm, supportive and trusted adults helps children develop self-regulation. Just like newborn babies need help regulating basic needs like body temperature, heart rate and sleeping, they also need help regulating their emotions. Babies have simple ways to manage their emotional experiences, for example, looking away when they need a break or sucking their thumb after hearing a loud sound. By the end of the second year most toddlers have learnt some self-regulation skills, such as being able to wait a short time for something they want and paying attention when someone is talking to them.

All children learn to regulate their emotions through watching the adults in their life (like parents and carers) manage their own feelings and behaviour. Parents and carers are therefore important models for their children in their day to day life. When children see parents and carers effectively regulate their own emotions and actions, it helps them to learn how to manage their own feelings and behaviours.

Children learn over time how to self-regulate without the presence of a parent or carer. For example, a three-year-old may be able to share a toy for a short time when a parent or carer is present but find it more difficult when the parent or carer is away from them. However, by the time children are about four, they are more able to understand and manage their emotions, slow down their behaviour and focus attention on tasks. Also at this age children can manage two or three feelings, thoughts or tasks at the same time. All of these new skills help children to self-regulate more effectively when their parent or carer is not with them.

**'Children learn to regulate thoughts, feelings, behaviours and emotion by watching and responding to adults' self-regulation.'**

## Why is self-regulation important for mental health?

Self-regulation skills are linked to how well children manage many other tasks during early childhood. With these skills, children are more able to manage difficult and stressful times that occur as part of life, such as loss of a pet, death of a family member or family separation. This helps to decrease the ongoing impact of stress that can contribute to mental health difficulties.

As a child learns to self-regulate, skills such as concentrating, sharing and taking turns also develop. This enables a child to move from depending on others to beginning to manage by themselves. Most children at some stage will struggle to manage their feelings and behaviours, particularly when they are tired, hungry or facing new experiences. When this happens, they might become upset, sulky or angry. This is all part of being a young child and is not necessarily cause for concern.

Difficulties in emotional and behavioural self-regulation that occur often, across a number of settings and over long periods of time can be warning signs that mental health difficulties may be present. Some of the signs of self-regulation difficulties in children include ongoing difficulties with concentration (e.g., being unable to listen to a story), looking very sad and uninterested in daily activities (e.g., playing with other children), or becoming easily upset and worried so they are unable to move on. These types of self-regulation difficulties can interrupt important tasks of childhood such as learning, maintaining relationships and understanding of feelings and behaviour. It is when difficulties occur often and for an extended time that seeking advice from a health professional may be necessary.



<sup>1</sup>Florez, I. R. (2011) Developing Young Children's Self-Regulation through Everyday Experiences. *Young Children*, p51. Available at: [http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201107/Self-Regulation\\_Florez\\_OnlineJuly2011.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201107/Self-Regulation_Florez_OnlineJuly2011.pdf)

'... sensitive and comforting support in reaction to young children's stress is a key to nurturing self-regulation'<sup>2</sup>

## What do self-regulation difficulties look like?

Self-regulation of feelings can be the most challenging part of emotional development. A child must be able to self-regulate many different feelings in 'real-life' situations. Children will experience difficulties in regulating their feelings and behaviours as they are still developing these skills. For example, a young child may have difficulty settling into a predictable routine (for example, sleeping, feeding) or managing reactions to changes in their environment (for example, loud noise, bright lights). An older child may find it difficult to wait their turn or calm down after becoming upset. One way of understanding self-regulation difficulties in babies, toddlers and preschool children is to look at their behaviour. Behaviours can be broken down into two broad types:



<sup>2</sup>Gonzalez-Mena, J., Widmeyer Eyer, D. (2009) *Infants, Toddlers, and Caregivers: A Curriculum of Respectful, Responsive Care and Education* (5th ed), p226. McGraw-Hill

### 1. Externalising Behaviours

For example: tantrums, fighting with peers, not following an adult's directions, hitting, spitting, and throwing self on the ground.

These behaviours are often relatively easy to recognise and tend to be noticed quickly. This is because these behaviours can be quite disruptive and are likely to demand attention from parents, carers and staff. Children who engage in externalising behaviours experience difficulty maintaining the ability to self-regulate their feelings and behaviours and tend to react instead by doing things like hitting, screaming or crying uncontrollably. When this happens, a child will need others to help them to regain control of their feelings and behaviours and get back into balance.

### 2. Internalising Behaviours

For example: worry, anxiety, sadness, becoming easily upset, withdrawing from social situations, turning away from parent, carer or staff.

Internalising behaviours tend to be more difficult to notice because feelings are directed inwardly by the child and do not necessarily draw attention from others. These are the opposite of externalising behaviours. A child who internalises their emotions still experiences strong feelings, but keeps them inside instead of expressing them. An example is when a child falls over and hurts themselves badly, but does not cry or ask for help. In this situation the child will need help from others to express their feelings and experiences.

In general, children who struggle with self-regulation find it hard to maintain a balance and their stress levels can get stuck in the 'on' or 'off' position. When this happens children find it hard to move back into balance by themselves. When a child's stress level is stuck in the 'on' position, they are easily upset and tend to externalise their behaviour (for example, crying uncontrollably, or lashing out by hitting). When stuck in the 'off' position, children tend to suppress feelings, remain distressed for longer periods of time and internalise their behaviour (for example, avoiding other people, or not asking for help when hurt).

## Responding to stress

The ability to self-regulate feelings and behaviours is linked to the ability to regulate stress levels. For a newborn everything is new and stressful, even a nappy change. When parents and carers are gentle and nurturing in caring for their baby, their baby learns to feel safe in new situations and trust their parents or carers will look after them. Older babies and young children face other everyday challenges such as meeting new people or being separated from the adults they trust. Children learn coping skills by understanding their emotions and overcoming these small stresses. Successfully overcoming these small stresses helps children to develop and practice skills that will assist them in coping with future challenges.

Children can develop skills to cope with stress in different ways. One way is through exposure to manageable amounts of stress, for example having to wait a short time for their turn on the swing. Another way is to look at an adult who is feeling frustrated (for example, someone who has lost their keys) to see how to respond appropriately. It is not necessarily the nature of the stress that matters, but the availability of others to help that assists children to develop coping skills.

Responding to stress is an essential part of the body's response to life. Difficulty regulating stress is related to a large range of mental and physical health difficulties. Stress can affect physical health by weakening the immune system and increasing vulnerability to infections and other illnesses. Stress also affects mental health and has links to depression and anxiety. Being able to cope with stress is like having a strong immune system. For young children, good 'emotional immunity' comes from experiences of feeling safely held, touched, seen and helped to recover from stress. Poor 'emotional immunity' is connected to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and lack of self-regulation.

When children experience ongoing stress their learning, behaviour, physical and mental health can be affected. Children who have experienced many sad, stressful and fearful times when they are young need more support to buffer these negative effects and build their self-regulation and coping skills.



**Self-regulation skills develop gradually, so it is important adults hold expectations that fit with a child's age and ability.**

## Recovering after stress

A positive response to stress is one of the key indicators a child has learnt to regulate their emotions and behaviours. When parents and carers are observant and attend sensitively (for example, provide loving touch, responding consistently) children learn how to regulate their feelings and behaviour in stressful situations. When children reconnect with parents and carers after a disruption such as a tantrum, conflict or separation, it helps them feel safe and enables them to move on from their distress.

Reconnecting with parents and carers after a disruption also helps children to learn that difficult feelings (for example, fear, anger and sadness) are temporary and there are things they can do to make themselves feel better. They learn about:

- ▶ resolving differences, particularly if conflict is involved
- ▶ managing disappointment
- ▶ calming themselves and moving forward.

These are important coping skills and help children feel happier and more able to achieve their goals. As children get older they can use these skills in their relationships with others.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au). The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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