



TEACHING KIDS EMOTIONAL REGULATION

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WHAT IS EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

Emotion regulation is involved in how we feel emotions, how we pay attention to emotions, how we think about these feelings and how we behave – from our physiological reactions (e.g., heart rate) to our coping behaviours.

Poor emotion regulation is often identified in youth who are at-risk for psychological problems: these youth either try to control their emotions too much (so that these negative emotions are internalized) or they are not able to control their emotions enough (which leads to disruptive behaviors and significant fluctuations in mood).

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Children cannot regulate their emotions on their own. Parents are critical in helping children co-regulate big emotions. In fact, emotion regulation is viewed as developing primarily through the parent-child relationship. Children need help to make sense of how they feel, in understanding why they are feeling the way they do, and in figuring out what they can do about it.

FOSTERING EMOTIONAL REGULATION

LABEL EMOTIONS. Parents are encouraged to label their own emotions (e.g., “I’m so excited about going to the pool with you today!”), those of their child (e.g., “I know you are feeling sad because you have to put away your iPad”) and those in books, on tv, in videogames, etc.

MODEL GOOD COPING. Find appropriate opportunities to provide a “running commentary” on how you are feeling and why you are feeling that way. That is, talk about what you are going to do about improving the feeling if it’s a challenging feeling to have.

USE BOOKS. There are plenty of books for managing emotions. Dr. Aubrey’s favourites are “Glad Monster, Sad Monster” for preschoolers and “The Kids Guide for Staying Awesome and In Control” for school-aged kids.

STAY OUT OF THE RED ZONE. Do your best to stay calm when your child is overwhelmed with emotion. As a co-regulator, you need to “contain” the child’s emotion, like a big bucket that holds water. This provides the child with a sense of safety and security.

INTERNALIZED FEELINGS. Try using the analogy of the container (a box or bucket) that gets filled as your child faces frustration, disappointment or hurt. If it’s getting too full, it needs to be emptied. Let your child express his negative emotions by finding time to dump out the contents of his feelings container by talking to you or writing things down.

SCALE EMOTIONS. Use visuals, such as a thermometer, beakers, traffic light, faces, or a numbered scale, to help your child understand that emotions are on a continuum. Help them figure out where they are on this continuum several times a day.

SELF-REGULATION. Come up with activities your child can do when feeling overwhelmed. These activities should be organized in the following categories: (1) distraction/redirection (when it’s best to move on and disengage from the emotion); (2) relaxation/sensory (when it’s best to calm your body); and (3) problem solving (when there is a problem that is exacerbating the emotion).

SIZE OF PROBLEM - SIZE OF REACTION. Organize hypothetical problems and emotional reactions into categories (tiny, small, medium, big, huge). When your child has an emotional reaction, work with her to figure out if the size of the reaction matches the size of the problem. If it does not, suggest ways to alter the reaction so it is more appropriate. The emotion is not invalid, but its intensity might be.

PRAISE GOOD COPING. As parents, we often forget to point out the good behaviours, but we are quick to notice the not-so good ones.