

Dealing with Big Feelings – Teaching Kids How to Self-Regulate



Life with a small human can be hilarious, wonderful, ridiculous and unpredictable. And wild – so wild. All kids are capable of ‘bewildering’ behaviours that can bring the strongest of us to our knees. These behaviours can take different forms. There are the ones that can be seen through the eye of a needle from a solar system away, no trouble at all – meltdowns, outbursts and tantrums, hitting, screaming. Then there are the ones that are a little harder to spot, but which light up our radar all the same – the worries that spin out of control, the sadness or withdrawal that lasts a little longer than it should, the tendency to bottle up feelings.

None of us were born knowing how to control big emotions and our children will take a while to learn. This is okay – time is something they have plenty of. In the meantime, the job for us as the adults in their lives who care about them, is to nurture their ability to manage their emotional responses in healthy, adaptive ways.

Of course, it would be a lovely thing if the small humans in our lives were born knowing how to stay calm, or with the capacity to respond to disappointments with the adorability of a sleepy kitten, but that’s just not how it was meant to be. Young children don’t have the words to describe what they want, or to explain how they feel. The sheer frustration of this can make them vulnerable to being barreled by the big feelings that can overwhelm any of us from time to time.

So when you say ‘self-regulation’ ...

Self-regulation is being able to manage feelings so they don’t intrude heavily on relationships or day-to-day life. This might involve being able to resist ‘losing it’ in upsetting or frustrating situations, or being able to calm down when big feelings start to take over.

Self-regulation is NOT about ‘not feeling’. Locking feelings away can cause as much trouble as any outburst. There is nothing wrong with having big feelings. All feelings are valid and it’s okay for kids to feel whatever they feel. What’s important is how those feelings are managed. The key is to nurture children towards being able to acknowledge and express what they’re feeling, without causing breakage to themselves, their friendships or other people.

Why is self-regulation important?

When children are able to regulate their emotional responses, they become less vulnerable to the ongoing [impact of stress](#). They are also more likely to have the emotional resources to

maintain healthy friendships, and the capacity to focus and learn. [Research](#) has found that the ability to self-regulate is a strong predictor of academic success.

Outbursts? Or opportunities.

Every outburst is an opportunity to steer them in a different direction and to strengthen the skills they need to name and manage their emotions in a way that works for them, without the seismic fallout that can happen when kids are unable to regulate their emotions.

High emotion and tantrums are NOT a sign of bad parenting or bad kids. They are never that. Taking tantrums or wild behaviour personally can make it more difficult to use them as an opportunity to nurture valuable skills in your child. It can be easy to feel judged when our kiddos choose the top of the escalator on a busy Saturday morning to throw themselves on the ground because you peeled their banana all the way to the bottom and nothing – nothing – can ever be the same again, but you are raising humans, and it's hard and it's important and the path is a crooked one with plenty of uphill, downhill, and hairpin curves. Some people will never understand. Let that be their problem, not yours.

My child does body throw-downs like they invented the move. When is the lack of self-regulation a problem?

All kids are different, and they will develop according to their own schedules. As anyone who has small humans in their lives will know, there are some things they just won't be hurried on – breakfast when you're in a hurry, stories at bedtime, and of course, the potentially life-altering decision of what to have on their toast. And self-regulation – they won't be hurried on that either. All good things take time, and when you're trying to master an art, patience is required from your entire support crew.

By school age, most kids tend to have the foundations for self-regulation. This doesn't mean they'll get it right all the time – they won't. What it means is that by about age five, most kids tend to be fairly able to regulate their emotions most of the time. By this age, they can generally wait a short while for something they want, take turns, focus on what's being said to them, and they are less likely to bring out their wild side when things don't go their way.

Not all kids will grow out of difficult emotional behaviour by school. Sometimes, difficulties with self-regulation are just a matter of emotional immaturity. Sometimes, it can be a sign that there might be an underlying issue. Some of the common ones are ADHD (difficulty focusing and frustration with not being able to complete certain tasks can lead to high emotion), [anxiety](#) (tantrums or aggressive behaviour can be driven by anxiety – it's the fight part of the fight or flight response), or learning difficulties (again, driven by frustration).

Of course, just because your child might be struggling with self-regulation, that doesn't necessarily mean there is an underlying issue. It's just something to keep in mind if there is a constant struggle with self-regulation that doesn't seem to show much improvement by school age. Remember though, all children will develop at a different pace, and all will struggle with self-regulation until they strengthen the skills. Regardless of age or stage of development though, opportunities to strengthen the capacity for self-regulation is something that all children and teens will benefit hugely from.

How does self-regulation develop?

Gradually. And with plenty of support from a very dedicated and wonderful crew – modeling, coaching, and responding in a way that makes it safe for kids to explore and experiment with their own responses.

The part of the brain that is heavily involved in regulating big emotions and considering consequences – the pre-frontal cortex – won't be fully developed until sometime in the early 20s. Until then, the brain is wide open and hungry for experiences that will strengthen it in a way that will support them as healthy, strong adults.

We can see signs of emotional regulation in babies, such as when they soothe themselves by sucking their thumb. By about age two, most toddlers are able to wait a little while for something they want, or listen when they are being spoken to. As children grow and experiment more with self-regulation, they will be more able to widen the gap between a feeling and response.

My teen is moody and explosive. What's going on?

By adolescence, you might notice that your teens are having more difficulty than ever with self-regulation. This is a very normal part of adolescence. During adolescence, the teen brain is powered up with about a billion new neurons. This is to give them the brain power they need for the developmental mountain climbing they'll do during adolescence – new skills, new experiences, new relationships, new milestones. With so many new brain cells looking to strengthen and connect, things can get a bit hectic up there, which can drive behaviour that is far from adorable. They probably wish it could be different too. Remind yourself that they are being driven by a [brain under construction](#) and gently hold the boundaries. (And I know this isn't always easy!) And then write this on your mirror where you'll see it every day or whenever you retreat to the bathroom for a deep breath or a chardonnay: 'It's a stage. It will end.' Like all stages, when they have done the important developmental work they need to do, they'll come back stronger, wiser, more wonderful and more capable than before. For more information on teenage flare-ups and how to deal with them, [see here](#).

What can I do to help my child learn how to self-regulate?

1. Explain where their big emotions come from.

When high emotion drives difficult behaviour, it's a sign that the distance between the stimulus – whatever has upset them – and their response is short and fairly automatic. When kids are in high emotion, they are being driven by the part of their brain that acts on impulse. The problem is that this all happens so quickly, the thinking part of the brain doesn't have time to engage and steer them towards a healthier response. The key is helping them extend that distance so they are less likely to act on impulse, and more likely to let the thinking part of the brain (the pre-frontal cortex) get involved. Kids do great things with the right information. Talk to them in the language they will understand. Nobody knows your child better than you, so adjust the language to suit. Here is an idea of the way it could go:

'Feelings are important and it's always okay for them to be there, but when feelings get too big, they can make the thinking, calming part of your brain take

a little break until the big feelings are gone. That's not good for anyone. This is when you can end up making silly decisions or doing things that land you in trouble. Your brain is strong, healthy and magnificent, but it's important to learn how to be the boss of it, even when you have big feelings. To do this, you need to strengthen the thinking part of your brain at the front of your head. It does a fabulous job when it's on, but we need to make it stronger so it stays in charge even when the big feelings come. This will take a little practice but for sure you can do it. You're pretty amazing like that.

So how can you be the boss of your brain when big feelings take over? One of the most powerful ways is to breathe strong, deep breaths. Remember how big feelings can get a little bossy and tell the thinking, calming part of the brain that it's not needed? Well thankfully, strong deep breathing relaxes your brain enough, so the thinking part can do the magical things it does – calm down your big feelings and help you to make sensible decisions. There's a teeny problem though – it's too hard to do new things when you're really upset, so the way around this is to practice when you're calm. The more you practice strong deep breathing when you're calm, the easier it will be to do when you're feeling upset. And the more you remember to do it when you're upset, the stronger your brain will be.

Here are some fun ways to practice. You can do them anywhere – in the car, in the bath, while you're kissing the cute face in the mirror, while you're pretending to be a rock star – anywhere, anytime ...

Hot Cocoa Breathing

Pretend that you have your hands wrapped around a mug of hot cocoa. Breathe in through your nose for three seconds, as though you're smelling the deeeelicious chocolatey smell. Then breathing out through your mouth for three seconds, as though you are blowing it cool. Keep doing this four or five times, until you start to feel yourself relax.

Figure 8 Breathing

Using your finger, imagine that you are writing the figure '8'. You can do it anywhere you like – on your arm, your leg, your tummy, a soft toy gorilla – anywhere. As you draw the top of the 8, breathe in for three. When you get to the middle, hold for one. Then, as you trace the bottom part, breathe out for three. Let it be a really smooth, relaxing movement, and repeat it a few times. Ahhhh ... bliss.

2. And now to strengthen their brain ... Mindfulness.

The research on benefits of mindfulness could fill a small city. Mindfulness works by changing [the structure and the function of the brain](#). First, it strengthens the part of the brain that drives high emotion, so that reacts less automatically or impulsively. Second, it strengthens the pre-frontal cortex – the thinking part of the brain that is able to weigh in and calm big emotions and consider consequences. Finally, it strengthens

the connections between the two, meaning that in times of high emotion, the pre-frontal cortex will be quicker and more able to work with the emotion centres of the brain to find calm.

3. Now, about expectations ...

It's critical not to expect more of children than they are capable of, given their stage of development. Young children just don't have the capacity to be calm and reasonable all the time. Punishing them for a lack of self-regulation is like punishing them for not being able to fly. It won't help anything and will run the risk that shame will get in the way of them feeling safe enough to explore a different way to respond. Ideally, it's best for them to learn the best way to respond by figuring out for themselves the best way to be. Doing something because they know it's the right thing to do, will be a more enduring and more powerful response than anything that is driven by a fear of the consequences.

4. But don't let them outsource the job.

It can be so tempting to smooth the rough edges for them when they have an outburst, but this won't be doing them any favours. In fact, it will rob them of the opportunity to learn a valuable skill – how to manage their emotions themselves. When we move in too quickly to soothe it or 'fix it', we're not giving them the space and opportunity they need to learn how to self-soothe. This doesn't mean we leave them to it. What it means is not rushing in too quickly or working too hard to calm them when they get upset and behave poorly.

5. Let them 'borrow' your prefrontal cortex.

When things get wild, try to dampen things down with some pre-frontal cortex sensibility and calm. (The pre-frontal cortex is the calming, thinking part of the brain.) For young children, the pre-frontal part of the brain is still developing, which is one of the reasons it can be sent so easily offline when they are in high emotion. What you can do, is loan them yours. The way to do this is to stay calm, be a strong, supportive presence, and wait for them to catch up. Continue to have boundaries, but before you talk about a better way to do things, lead them gently out of the chaos and into a space that's calm and settle.

6. Shift the focus.

There's so much for our kiddos to learn, and they will all have their strengths and the things they need a little more coaching on. If your little person needs a hand learning how to regulate their emotions, think of this as just another skill that needs nurturing, rather than 'bad behaviour'. Shifting the focus from 'a bad behaviour that needs changing' to 'a skill that needs strengthening' is more empowering for you and your child. It takes the shame away and makes it easier for your child to hear the important learnings you need them to know. It will set the scene for you to work on this more as a 'team' and less 'you vs them'.

7. Provide a 'scaffold' between the behaviour that is and the behaviour you want.

The idea of a scaffold is to provide a bridge between what they know and are capable of, and the skills they need to learn. Give your child just enough to move them forward. Let's say there is a clashing of minds between your child and a friend over – who's going to be the policeman and who is going to be the baddie. Your child is getting upset because he has to be the baddie ALL THE TIME because the other child, 'steals the police costume ALL THE TIME because she thinks she is the boss of the police costume, and I never get to be the police so I always have to be the baddie and that's not fair because she thinks that the police are allowed to use the yellow cup but the yellow cup is MINE!' Sounds reasonable.

In this situation, scaffolding might involve coaching the children on the words to use, as opposed to resolving the situation for them. This might not always go in a smooth steady line, but when you're four and there's a police costume on the line, it's not just about who gets to wear the good gear, it's about power, voice, feeling heard, fairness and feeling validated. If coaching on the conversation doesn't lead to an outcome that both people are okay with, scaffolding might involve making suggestions, such as taking turns, or playing something else. The idea is that next time a conflict arises, the child can be encouraged to remember the things they tried last time. 'Do you remember when you had the argument about the policeman's costume? What were some of the things you did to work through that?'

8. Expose them gently to manageable amounts of stress.

Gently expose them to situations that call on their need for self-regulation. The brain builds by experience, and the more experiences they have, the stronger they will be.

9. Teach them to 'step back'.

This is a valuable skill for all kids and teens. Stepping back puts distance between them and their behaviour, enough to let them see the bigger picture, or parts of the picture that might be out of their close-up view. When there has been an incident of high emotion, and they are on their way to finding calm, ask them to imagine stepping back and watching what happened as though it was a movie. 'If someone was doing what you were doing, what would you think of them.' 'What do you think they are feeling/thinking/needing?' 'What would you want to say to them?' This is a great skill that will build empathy and strengthen that part of the brain that can look logically and rationally at a situation. Don't worry if they don't get it straight away, or if they need a little coaching. The more opportunities they have to 'switch it on', the more likely it is that they will be able to do this themselves eventually.

10. Provide the opportunity and support for self-reflection.

Self-reflection is a skill that many adults haven't yet mastered, but it's such an important one. When children can explore their behaviour and their feelings in a safe, non-judgemental environment, they are going to find their own answers and wisdom. There are no lessons or learnings that are more meaningful than the ones we find ourselves. To nurture their capacity for self-reflection, calmly and gently, in a non-judgemental, non-critical way, help them to explore their experience. Encourage them to get a sense of what happened when things got out of control. At what point did

things start feeling bad? What happened? What happened in their body? How can next time be different?

11. Accept where they are, but that's not the ending.

This involves two things that seem to be opposed – acceptance on the one hand, and pushing for change on the other. When they are used together, they can be more powerful than each on its own. To do this, acknowledge that your child is doing his or her their best, ‘I know that you’re doing the best you can right now, and I also know that you can do better.’ The acceptance that comes with this provides a safe, non-judgemental space to experiment with a new way to be. The idea is to teach them the skills they need, while at the same time holding them strong with a gentle, loving acceptance and a belief in what they are capable of. This focuses on the strengths and the opportunity, not the deficiency.

And finally ...

Although some kids naturally have a more even temper, all kids will need a hand to build strong self-regulation skills. Nobody was born with these already established, and all kids will take time to build them up. Remember though, all kids are different. What they lack on one front, they’ll make up for in another. Being able to regulate their feelings and behaviour, self-soothe, and stop very valid feelings spinning out of control are big jobs for all kids, but important ones for them to learn.