

Cultivating Emotion Regulation in Children

An outsider looking at your family would likely see your behaviors, reactions, mannerisms and yes, jokes, echoed in your child. This isn't deliberate, children naturally learn from their environment, and they observe you all the time, taking in how you deal with a frustrating phone call, respond to their needs, and relate to your spouse. Those unconscious lessons are sometimes the most powerful ones. While you shouldn't get performance-anxiety thinking about what kind of role model you are for your child, you should consider what you want them to see. Getting it right for your child is a powerful motivation to get a better handle on managing your own emotions.

There is important work to be done throughout childhood to give your child the tools needed for developing emotional resiliency. One way to think of this is that you are making sure they get the daily vitamin that allows them to develop a healthy relationship with their feelings. Just like the vaccines your child receives to protect them against disease, your work to help them develop the ability to regulate their emotions provides them with the inner strength and coping mechanisms to weather the challenges that your child will inevitably face throughout their life.

This emotional self-regulation begins in infancy as a child learns to sooth himself, for example, being able to fall back to sleep when awoken in the middle of the night. Learning how to share and take turns or developing the ability to concentrate on a given task or activity are also steps along this path. Even at this young age, parents play an important role.

- Pay attention. Name and label feelings to help your child understand what they are feeling
- Remain calm when your child gets upset.
- Support and comfort your child when they are frustrated, tired or angry
- Simplify tasks into manageable steps and help your child understand how each "bite" connects to the others. Acknowledge accomplishment and mastery both of the steps and the larger goal
- Comfort using words, gestures and touch as cues like "You sound angry," "You look sad," or stroking a sobbing child's back to comfort and calm them.
- Show empathy, responding to what a child says or is trying to communicate

Most important is to be a good role model for your child. How do you handle stress? What happens when you get angry? Click here to read *Emotional Regulation: A User's Guide* to learn more about managing your own emotions including suggestions for techniques you can use to do so.

Set your child you for success. Don't push him beyond age appropriate experiences, activities or challenges. Emotional regulation develops over time, in synch with overall growth ([click here](#) for a checklist for kids and teens) Remember too that even if he is physically or intellectually precocious, their emotional development is likely not.

By the time your child begins school, her ability to reason will be developing. When she gets angry, you can help her rate her anger and talk through it, so she begins to understand what she is feeling, both emotionally and physically—you can print a [chart](#) to post on the refrigerator door for everyone in the family to refer to.

Start to link relaxation techniques, like deep breathing or visualizations you are already practicing, to managing feelings. Try this one: you go from being a robot with all your muscles clenched tight to releasing them to be a limp rag doll. This is an effective way to release tension without having to use a lot of words to explain what is happening. Try it together before watching an episode of a television show or playing a video game with your child, or after coming home from the playground. Make an observation about how doing it makes you feel; you're planting a seed for your child to understand how he can use his body to help control how he feels.

As a child becomes more verbal and able to name the emotions he is feeling, you can practice coping "self-talk," teaching them how to coach themselves through a stressful moment. This is something you can model. When a driver cuts you off on the way home from school, narrate what you are doing not to lose your cool. You could say: "That driver makes me crazy, but I'm not going to blast the horn. I'm taking a deep breath and relaxing my shoulders so that I can pay better attention to the road." Another is to choose a silly word to use (like "marshmallow" or "fizzywhizzy") when you want to swear at another driver. Adding humor into the equation of letting off steam is another great lesson.

Throughout childhood, talking about feelings is an important step in learning how to manage emotions. **Name the emotion**, whether it is negative like anger, sadness, stress, or positive like joy, excitement, anticipation. **Accept the reaction**; let your child know that whatever she is feeling is o.k. and is hard to control. What she can change is her actions, how she responds to the emotion. Find a way to help her to **release it** by expressing or acting in response to it, as long as she doesn't hurt herself or someone else, whether it is by writing about them, talking to someone she trusts, giving herself permission to cry or laugh, taking time to relax, working out or channeling her feeling into an intense activity. These are all valuable steps to managing strongly felt emotions. Lastly, **help your child figure out what she needs to take care of herself**, what soothes her; it may be getting a hug, listening to a favorite playlist, taking a walk or nap, or getting support from a trusted friend. Just as it is important to name emotions, it is important to acknowledge and name what provides comfort. Naming is one way of knowing in both cases.

As your child approaches the teen years, as a parent, you need to step up your game. Adolescents react impulsively and instinctively. Their gut-level interpretation of emotions is controlled by the amygdala. It controls the fight or flight response, the basis of so many poor decisions made by teenagers. Remember that the part of the brain that reasons, plans, considers consequences and counteracts impulses, the pre-frontal cortex, isn't fully developed until the mid-20s. Throughout the teen years, the pre-frontal cortex gradually reins in the amygdala. As a parent, you can short circuit the gut impulsive reactions your teen is feeling.

As the parent, you're the coach. By calming your teen, slowing her down to think through feelings, actions and consequences, you are helping her make better decisions, and a boost to her developing pre-frontal cortex. You can say: "I want to understand what you are saying – I know it is important. Can you speak to me calmly?" You can then help her consider more rationally what she is feeling and what she wants to do. This can be challenging because you need to juggle your own judgment with your teen's and you don't want to take over and draw conclusions and make decisions for her. Another way to think about your role as a parent, is to think about your guidance as providing options which she can explore and choose among. For example, if she sees an upsetting post on social media and she wants to immediately respond by posting something to get back at someone, you can lay out several alternatives that you know are safe and she won't regret once she's cooled down. While you have limited the choices, you haven't taken away your teen's ability to make a choice – while being a good parent, you're also an empowering your teen to choose for herself.

Throughout the teen years, all parents and their offspring ride an emotional roller coaster as the push and pull of dependence and self-reliance, a teen's emerging independent identity, brain development that allows for good judgement to blossom over time, are mixed together in a potent stew. To achieve the result every parent wants for their child, a successful launch into adulthood, instilling the skills of emotional regulation is a cornerstone of good and effective positive parenting. Read **Taking Action to Cultivate Your Child's (and Your Own) Ability to Successfully Regulate Emotions** for ideas and suggestions for cultivating emotional resiliency in your family as well as links to additional articles and resources, including helpful YouTube videos to share with your family.

Taking Action to Cultivate Your Child's (and Your Own) Ability to Successfully Regulate Emotions

When young children need to regain their cool try this:

1. Stretch out one hand like a star in front of you.
2. Get your other pointer finger ready to trace around the fingers of your outstretched hand.
3. Take a practice breath, slowly breathe in through your nose and let it out through your mouth.
4. Slide your pointer finger up the outside of your pinky while take a slow breath in through your nose.
5. As you exhale through your mouth, slide your finger down the other side of your pinky. Try to finish exhaling just as you reach the bottom.
6. Keep going until you've finished with all your fingers and thumb.

You can find printable pages with suggestions like this to help young children manage big emotions [here](#).

[Print a feelings thermometer](#) for your fridge.

Glitter Jars are magical, especially when trying to shift attention away from thoughts and emotions, the basic goal of all mindful practices. Whenever we bring awareness to what we are experiencing with our senses, we are being mindful. When we do this simple act, our minds calm down. This is a jar filled with water, clear gel glue, and ultra-fine glitter. You shake it and the glitter settles slowly, which is very relaxing to watch, providing something to focus on in order to relax.

(<http://blissfulkids.com/mindfulness-kids-teens-calming-glitter-jar-aka-mind-jar/>)

Materials:

- A clean empty water bottle, with label removed, that will fit in your child's hands
- Clear gel glue
- Super glue
- Glitter
- Hot water

Directions:

- **Fill the bottle** about 3/4 of the way with hot water, then add a bottle of glitter glue and a small tube of glitter.
- **Screw on the cap** and play with the mixture until it takes about five minutes (our standard time out time!) for the glitter to settle at the bottom of the bottle. Add more clear gel glue to make it go slower or more water to make it settle faster.
- **Super glue the cap** onto the water bottle so it can't come off in your child's hands.

Coping Skills for Managing Emotions is a useful guide for helping a parent reflect and respond to a child’s emotional outburst. These tables provide helpful cues and responses.

When care givers...	This helps ...
<p>1. Observe Don't say anything. Watch first. Pay attention to the situation. What was the build up? (e.g., what happened before the child displayed their emotion?). Watch for facial expressions, tone of voice and posture, as well as listening to what the child is saying to get a complete picture.</p>	<p>Adults to have a better understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● what the child may be experiencing and why ● how the child expresses their emotions.

[Click here for all of the cues and responses.](#)

Older children need coaching to help them learn how to manage their emotions. Don't fall into the habit of being the solution to your child’s problems, your role is to coach them:

1. When you child is calm, sit down with him to label and validate what he is feeling. Listen, don't judge what they are feeling. Try to reflect and restate what he is telling you so that you show that you understand what he has said.
2. Don't mistake validating his feelings with accepting his behavior. You have to deal with bad behavior. While you want to let your child know that what he is feeling is okay, you can't accept or condone his actions, especially if they have hurt someone else. "I see that you're angry and frustrated. I can understand that, but you can't take it out on your sister."

3. Brainstorm with your child ways that he might solve the problem that upset him. Include talking about ways to prevent or avoid the situation in the future. Remind him of ways to “step back” from his emotions and not let them control his actions. Help him to break big problems into more manageable parts. Remember that you are the coach here; don’t step in and manage what he does. Support his efforts, cheer on his incremental progress, be there when he stumbles, and celebrate his accomplishment when he resolves the problem, even if it isn’t a completely happy outcome. He needs to know that the process of working it out can be as important as the result.
4. Acknowledge his growth when he next faces a similar problem and handles it better. You’re the cheerleader as well as the coach.

Communications are key to giving your child the skills needed to emotional regulation :

- Make time for talking with and listening to each other. Family meals, time outside together and care rides are some opportunities for these conversations.
- Don’t skip talking about hard or negative emotions. Be open about the full range of feelings and give your child the vocabulary to express everything he feels. Make sure he knows that it’s okay to have bad or negative feelings and that in your family, no one judges what anyone else feels. By talking about feelings, he’ll learn the difference between feeling something and talking about it. Books, television and movies, the nightly news, and family reminiscences all present opportunities to have these conversations and develop words to describe feelings at a safe distance from what your child may be feeling, especially if those feelings are especially strong.
- Pay attention to body language and non-verbal messages. These cues may be your opening to start a conversation about what your child may be feeling at the moment and ways to respond to and manage those emotions.
- Work together to solve problems. Working together on building or fixing something is a good way to teach a lesson about frustration that isn’t burdened by emotional baggage. Next time you’re ready to scream at the computer or remote, ask your child to explain the solution to you, to help you solve your problem. She may be the calm and rational one in the family at that moment. If your child is doing something that makes you crazy, sit down with her and make a plan.
- Be honest; with your family, with others and with yourself. Acknowledge and apologize for your own mistakes, especially if you’ve lost your cool. Praise your child’s honesty (but don’t skip the consequences if any are called for). *Emotion Coaching: One of the Most Important Parenting Practices in the Universe*

Further Reading and Additional Resources

Raising Emotion Intelligent Kids and Teens: Anger and How to Be the Boss of Your Brain: Anger is an emotional and physical response. When something happens to make you angry, your brain thinks it has to protect you from danger so it releases chemicals – oxygen, hormones and adrenaline – to fuel your body so it can fight the threat or run from it.

Social Emotional Development Checklists for Kids and Teens

[*10 Tips to Help Your Child with Anger*](#)

Practical Steps for learning skills for *Managing Your Feelings*, includes material from ***The Self-Esteem Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Build Confidence and Achieve Your Goals*** by *Lisa M. Schab*, LCSW.

A helpful article about [*Anxiety in Kids*](#)

[*How to Explain Mindfulness to Kids*](#)

[*How to Practice Mindfulness with Kids*](#)

[Blissfulkids.com](#) is a website with many resources for understanding mindfulness and integrating mindful practices into your family.

[*Managing Big Emotions with Kids: Printable Resources*](#) has links to posters you can print out to post on the fridge door to help young children learn how to manage their emotions.

These YouTube videos are helpful to share with your child

An easy to understand YouTube video for kids and their families explaining [*Why Do You Lose Control of Emotions*](#). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc>

[*Take 5 Breathing for Kids: YouTube Video*](#) (A technique for calming)

[*What Your Child Needs Most When They're Angry: Helping Kids Manage Big Emotions*](#) (YouTube)

For parents of teens

[*Teen Flare-Ups: What You Need to Know to Make a Difference*](#) helps explain teenage brain development.

[*Hormones Affect How Teens' Brains Handle Emotions*](#) explains the role played by testosterone in the teen brain.

[*That Teenage Feeling: Biological Clues to Quirky Teen Behavior*](#)

[*Experiencing Teen Drama Overload: Blame Biology*](#) includes an excerpt from the book *Getting to Calm: Cool-Headed Strategies for Parenting Tweens and Teens*.

[*Emotion Coaching: One of the Most Important Parenting Practices in the Universe*](#)

Help your teen by making sure they get enough sleep, limit screen time at night, diet, exercise, recognize signs of depression: [*Help with Teenage Mood Swings*](#)

Read this if you're awake at night wonderful if you're too tough on your teen:

<https://www.webmd.boots.com/a-to-z-guides/features/parents-unreasonable>

[*What Adolescents Really Need from Parents*](#) explains how parents can help younger teens avoid depression and anxiety as they become more independent.

Keeping things in perspective and maintaining a sense of humor:

It's a Magical World: 7 Essential Parenting Lessons From 'Calvin and Hobbes'

(<https://www.parentmap.com/article/parenting-lessons-inspired-by-calvin-hobbes>)