

10 Ways to Foster Healthy Emotion Regulation by Meredith Gillespie, Ph.D., C.Psych

Emotion regulation is one particularly complex but essential area for parents to become more familiar. The term relates to a series of regulatory processes individuals use to maintain, change, inhibit, and increase their emotional responses and reactions. 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., increased heart rate) to our purposeful coping behaviours. These processes are integral in how a child comes to feel about herself and her relationships with others, her ability to cope in the face of frustration, disappointment, stress and uncertainty, and her mental health (see Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002, for a review). Poor emotion regulation skills are often identified in children and adolescents 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).

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 (Calkins, 1994). Children need help making 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. Co-regulation relates to how we communicate with our children, the language we use and the way we respond to their difficult emotions; how we play with our children; how we model good coping and express our own emotions; how we interpret our child's behaviour and set limits.

Here are some ways to support the development of healthy emotion regulation skills in children through co-regulation:

- 1. Label emotions: yours, mine, everybody's!** 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 the play date is over") and those in books, on tv, in videogames, etc. (e.g., "The dog is feeling frustrated because he lost his bone! He knows it's somewhere but he just can't find it!").
- 2. Choose books that will help expand your child's emotional vocabulary.** Books are particularly helpful in helping explain emotions to children. They may label emotions explicitly or they may provide a great jumping off point for parents to discuss feelings or label the emotions of the characters. Watch for a subsequent blog post on ways to enhance emotional vocabulary with young children which provides some titles to explore with your child.

3. **Act like a tour guide.** When you're on vacation, tour guides do a great job of letting you know where you are going and what to expect. Like vacationers in an unfamiliar place, children are having new experiences all of the time. Similarly, just as they get used to one place or activity, things change. Often we move so quickly from one activity to another that we don't give our kids enough warning about what is coming next. Abrupt changes can lead to meltdowns, especially for young children. Prepare your child for what to expect, whether it's a reminder of his bedtime routine or engaging him in planning for his first trip on an airplane. And notice what works best for your child: some children need more preparation than others.
4. **Don't let your child's emotional chaos cause you to overflow.** 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. If her emotions overwhelm you, she may feel more overwhelmed, which will exacerbate her difficulties and will cause her to have more trouble calming down.
5. **Model good coping.** Children learn best from the models they see. Find appropriate opportunities to provide a "running commentary" on how you are feeling and why you are feeling that way. Moreover, talk about what you are going to do about improving the feeling if it's a challenging feeling to have (e.g., "I'm a bit nervous about going to this party, because there will be a lot people there who I don't know. It might be a bit awkward at the beginning. But once I get to know some of these people – which I can do by asking them questions about themselves and telling them about myself – I won't feel nervous anymore!").
6. **Help your child figure out what feelings he has internalized throughout the day.** Once your child has a good emotional vocabulary, you can identify all the different emotions he experiences through his day. Try using the analogy of the container (a box, bucket, or some form of catch-all) that gets filled as your child faces frustration, disappointment or hurt. Using this same analogy, you can talk about how full his feelings container is getting throughout the day. If it's getting too full, it needs to be emptied (see below). Similarly, get him to draw pictures of feelings faces if words are harder to come by.
7. **Notice when and if the feelings container is getting too full.** Let your child express his negative emotions by finding time to dump out the contents of his feelings container. Children often have experienced a number of challenging events – some small and some big – over the course of their day. If the feelings container is close to overflowing, your child will only be able to handle so much before a meltdown or tantrum takes form. As a pro-active step, provide your child with the opportunity to tell you about any negative events that took place, as a way of emptying that container to leave room for the rest of the day. Protect that

time with your child from other interruptions, so that your child perceives his emotions and experiences as a priority.

8. **And if that container is getting full or is overflowing, be prepared to “sit in the mud” with your child.** If your child is having a meltdown, or is sharing with you that he is angry or sad or disappointed, we don't want to rush him out of these feelings or negate them. Mirror his emotions, and acknowledge that you understand how he must be feeling (even if you can't change the reasons why). Be careful not to try to sweep away the hard stuff too quickly either by providing quick solutions or by making judgments about the appropriateness of his feelings. This can be perceived as “not caring” or “not understanding” and may exacerbate his mood or negative behaviour. Children may feel the need to “really show you” how badly they feel, if they sense that you aren't getting it. Note: There are lots of great parenting books that discuss how to be in tune with your child's emotions while still setting limits and rules. See a subsequent blog post on Emotionally-Attuned Parenting for more details.
9. **Bring attention to good coping by your child.** For example, if your child didn't hit their sibling when faced with frustration, but came to you to ask for help and to tell you how she was feeling instead, this is the time to emphasize how appropriately and prosocially she acted. As parents, we often forget to point out the good behaviours, but we are quick to notice the not-so good ones. Also, when you sense that the feelings container is getting too full, suggest activities to help distract him, to help him relax or to clear his head: a bike ride or jumping on a trampoline (i.e., physical activity), playing with toys, reading a comic book, listening to music, or texting a friend are all good ways to keep the feelings container from getting too full.
10. **Engage in self-care.** As the emotional co-regulator for your child, you need to take care of yourself. When children are exposed to a high level of negative emotion in the household (e.g., stress, anxiety, sadness, frustration, anger), children are less able to regulate their emotions (Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). Similarly, recognize when you are emotionally available to be a good co-regulator. For example, if you are in a rush, are feeling stressed or feeling annoyed with your child, it may not be best time to “sit in the mud” with them. As much as it is possible, pro-actively seek out support – another parent, grandparent, caregiver – to help you with this during times of the day that are the hardest for you.

References

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Southam-Gerow, M. A., & Kendall, P. C. (2002). Emotion regulation and understanding implications for child psychopathology and therapy. *Clinical Psychology Review, 22*, 189-222