

Emotional Regulation: Children with an Early History of Negative Life Events

Attachment Consultation Education Services
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Service



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Children and youth who present with difficult early histories may struggle with knowing how to regulate emotions, and at times may present as 'emotionally younger' than their same-age peers. It is imperative to bear this in mind while helping these children make it through each day. Below are strategies, both proactive and in-the-moment, that many have found useful in helping children learn how to better regulate their emotions. Remember, everyone is unique and the strategies we use reflect these differences. It is important to allow the child/youth an opportunity to try different coping/calming techniques and to allow them to provide input along the way as they learn through practice.

Relationships are Key

We all need to feel that there are people we can turn to in times of need. Trusting in relationships can be difficult for children and youth with past trauma or abuse. Being available, welcoming, supportive and engaged helps reassure the child that their parent/caregiver is there to help. This in turn will help the child understand and feel trust within relationships.

Physical Activity

Physical activity changes brain activity. It also impacts how we feel. This surprisingly simple yet very effective strategy can go a long way to help children learn how to regulate their emotions. Build exercise into the child's day that encourages the use of large muscle groups to help burn off energy.

Relaxation

Relaxation and breathing exercises are effective in helping children feel calm and master control of their emotions and body. Guided imagery, yoga, deep breathing and visualization can be enjoyable and effective. Strategies that involve emptying the mind (e.g. meditation) should be avoided.

Repetitive Rhythmic Motion

Repetitive, patterned and rhythmic motion can help regulate our breathing and heart rate. This is most effective when small, regular time blocks are built into the day; for example six five-minute blocks will have greater, longer-lasting effect than one thirty-minute block.

Activity examples include rocking in a rocking chair, drumming, skipping, swinging and/or bouncing a ball against a wall.

Talk Feelings

Incorporate discussion of feelings into daily life. Identify emotions in yourself, others, and the child. Work together with the child to create a story that helps them identify how their body reacts when they have a feeling. Keep this information handy and refer to it often by having the child tell the story.

Identify Triggers

What is upsetting to the child? Do they react strongly to smells, sounds, touch, sights or taste? Could these be related to their early history? If possible, alter the environment to reduce triggers and increase feelings of safety (i.e. where do they feel safest in the classroom? Is it possible to place their desk there?).

Be a Detective

While some children may cue their needs to their caregivers all or some of the time, others may miscue and push caregivers away or act like they are fine when they are struggling emotionally. It is vital that caregivers read through these miscues and determine what signs the child shows when they are on the bottom of the circle as per the Circle of Security™. These signs can be minute and are highly individual, so it will take time to compile a list. It will be important to practice reading facial expression, body language, tone of voice and motor skills to determine what is occurring internally for the child (for example, a child insists they are okay but they aren't making eye contact and their voice sounds strained). Once a caregiver has determined where the child is on the circle, they can then work to meet the needs of the child.

Catch it Early

Although it may appear that a child's behaviour comes out of nowhere, there will be signs that they are struggling. The earlier one is able to determine where a child is on the circle, what emotion may be underlying the physical signs and what they need, the easier it will be to help the child regulate their emotion. This is why it is so important to read the unique cues/miscues/signs that children demonstrate in order to intervene early.

Identify a Safe Spot

Difficult feelings can be scary to deal with for children and youth who have traumatic early histories. Promoting feelings of safety is vital during these times. Help the child to point out a location where they feel safe and that is available to them, both proactively and in-the-moment. Ensure there are identified calming activities available in this place (see below).

Stay With

Often children and youth with early trauma and abuse have learned how to 'do it on my own'. Gently challenge this way of thinking/feeling by staying with the child to help them to regulate and work through the emotion. If it is unsafe to be physically close to the child, remain in the general area and ensure they know you are there nearby (e.g. check in often, tone of voice).

Engage the Senses

Trauma and difficult memories can easily resurface through sensory input (e.g. the sound of a siren or the smell of a certain perfume). By engaging the senses in a calming way, the child will have an opportunity to experience sensory input in a new, helpful and healthy way. The list below is not exhaustive and many of the examples engage more than one sense. Work with the child when they are calm and regulated to determine what they experience as soothing and calming.

Sense	Strategies for soothing and calming
Sight	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Photos of important people• Pictures of calming scenes (i.e., where would the child/youth love to go?)
Smell	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scented sachets• Essential oils that can be placed on a tissue (e.g., lavender)• Items from home that has a comforting scent
Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Music that has a soothing, calming effect• Guided imagery• Recorded track of loved one's voice offering encouragement, support, and love

Taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flavored gum• A specialty drink
Touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sand activity• Fidget toys• Playdoh• Soft fabric or blanket• Stuffed animal• Lego

Regulate on the Bottom, Work on the Top

It is very difficult to engage the thinking part of the brain when under stress. Imagine trying to write a test with a bear in the room; your score would be greatly compromised. Help the child regulate their emotions when they are on the bottom of the circle. Problem solve and plan for next time when the child shows that they are able to regulate their emotions and behavior. Remember, there is a time and place for everything and everyone.

Be Patient and Kind

Be kind to the child and kind to yourself. Changing coping strategies and learning new skills doesn't happen overnight. It is a gradual process that occurs with time and much effort, both on the part of the child and their caregivers. This is a challenge you can face together.

It's like learning to ride a bike... it takes practice, support and depends on the building development of skills.

