



Emotions

About emotions and emotion regulation

Early childhood is a rapid period of development where children start to learn about their emotions and how to regulate them. Some children, such as those with disabilities or developmental delays, will often need more support with learning to recognise, understand and regulate their emotions and related behaviour. Some will need support to identify their emotions and the emotions of other people. Others will need support to help them regulate their emotions which can quickly become intense and result in what might appear to be meltdowns, outbursts, defiance and other challenging behaviour.

Children's awareness of emotions increases through the interactions they have with adults, other children and new situations. They gradually learn words to describe emotions, learn more about how emotions feel and become more able to manage and express their own emotions in socially appropriate ways. These skills can be called self-regulation.

Whilst children learn the foundations of self-regulation and emotional awareness with usual childhood development, they may need extra support to learn more effective and socially appropriate ways to understand their emotions and manage their emotions by themselves. When children are able to regulate their emotions effectively, they are better able to learn, interact with others and become more independent. In early childhood children haven't yet learnt how to regulate their emotions and will need the support of others. There are many ways educators can support the development of these very early emotion regulation skills.



Evidence-based strategies

Model and talk about emotions

- **Model positive emotions:** Expressing positive emotions and regulating your own negative emotions in the learning environment may encourage young children to do the same.
- **Encourage emotion reflections:** Regularly using words/symbols/pictures related to feelings and emotions around children may help them understand their own and others' feelings. Help children identify emotions and communicate emotions as they arise during daily activities. This might involve talking about your own feelings, or asking a child to describe how they feel, or using picture cards to express their emotions, depending on how a child communicates.
- **Read books about emotions:** Reading stories about feelings, such as books with questions like "What do you do when you are mad, or when you are hurt, or sad?" may help children learn about feelings. Consider asking children to think about times when they had similar emotions or experiences to book characters. It might also help to ask children how they think book characters are feeling.

Encourage children to express emotions

- **Encourage pretend play:** Pretend play involves play where children act in different characters, pretend toys are real or imagine and make-believe scenarios which often involve acting out different emotional events. Regular pretend play with someone more experienced, like an educator, supports emotional development by providing children with ways to express and cope with feelings. It can also be a time where children can act out stressful situations they have experienced. Some children, such as those with autism, may need additional support to develop their pretend play skills.
- **Build positive relationships with children:** Having a close and secure relationship with children can help them adjust to environments and learn to regulate emotions. Educator-child relationships that are responsive to the needs of children, free from conflict and encourage independence can provide opportunities for children to learn to openly express feelings, seek help, cooperate and tolerate frustration.
- **Support children in stressful situations:** Warmth and positive support are vital to a child's social and emotional development. Providing emotional warmth, support and positive emotion expression for children during times of stress may teach them that emotions can be managed, and can help them learn how to regulate emotions.



Teach children to manage problems

- **Teach children to problem solve:** Problem-solving skills can be developed in young children through modelling and role-playing. Modelling might involve using puppets to show children how to problem solve. Teach them step-by-step problem solving, such as identifying a problem, thinking of two solutions and trying to use a solution. Encourage children to think of their own solutions to problems. Refer to AllPlay Learn's problem solving guide in relevant resources
- **Support seeking:** It may help to encourage children to seek support and ask for help when faced with stressful or challenging situations. Support seeking may involve emotional support to help children manage emotions like stress, anger or worry.

Best practice tips

Respond to children's emotions

- Responding to all emotions, whether they are viewed as 'positive' or 'negative', helps children to express, tolerate and regulate their emotions. Responding to emotions might involve acknowledging how a child is feeling, encouraging them to accept their emotion or providing comfort.

Talk about emotions

- Regularly using words related to feelings and emotions around children may help them understand their own and others' feelings. Help children identify emotion-related words as they arise during daily activities. This might involve you talking about your own feelings, or asking a child to describe how they are feeling.

Show children how to express emotions

- Showing children how to use words (or picture cards or the best method based on how they communicate) to talk about difficult emotions like anger, frustration or sadness can help them avoid physical displays of emotion or outbursts. AllPlay Learn's emotion cards in relevant resources to help children communicate how they are feeling.



Help children respond to conflict

- If you observe conflict between a pair or group of children, consider whether you need to intervene. If you decide to assist children with conflict, it may help to talk through the conflict with them. This may involve asking the children how the conflict made them feel, encouraging the children to talk to each other and finding solutions together.

Other considerations

Safety

- Children with less adaptive emotion regulation skills may engage in behaviours that are a danger to themselves or others
- Consider all children's safety if they experience intense anger, sadness or have meltdowns
- Relaxation may help a child calm down. You can watch an example of a breathing and relaxation exercise in a primary school setting on the [primary teacher resources page](#).

Behaviour

- Some children who haven't learn to regulate their emotions yet may need support with behaviours such as meltdowns, crying or angry outbursts, or defiance towards educators
- Using the ABC approach to behaviour may help to identify why a child shows challenging behaviours, what they are trying to communicate with their behaviour and which strategies may help support them
- Encouraging children to improve their problem solving skills may help them manage social, emotional or learning problems. Support children to problem solve using AllPlay Learn's Problem Solving Guide under relevant resources below.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Anxiety

- Feelings of worry and anxiety may be more common in children who experience complicated or challenging emotions
- Refer to the [anxiety page](#) if a child experiences ongoing worries or anxiety, particular when separating from caregivers



Transitions

- Children moving from the early childhood education and care setting to another setting (i.e. another early childhood education and care setting or primary school) may need extra support.
- The tips under Model and talk about emotions and helping children to express emotions support their self-regulation to manage the transition
- For more information about supporting children with disabilities when transitioning to a different education setting, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).

Common co-occurring conditions

- Children with emotion regulation challenges often experience other co-occurring disorders such as sensory challenges, social challenges, developmental delay, autism or anxiety.

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for supporting children with emotional issues include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Problem solving guide
- AllPlay Learn Story - What to do when I miss my family at kindergarten
- AllPlay Learn Story - What to do when I miss my family at childcare