



Emotions

About emotions and emotion regulation

Supporting children to develop emotion regulation skills is important for many aspects of their lives including their learning, interpersonal relationships and for their own social and emotional wellbeing. Students with disabilities and developmental challenges often need extra support with understanding and regulating their emotions. As a teacher you can help support all students to develop these skills.

Emotion regulation involves recognising, managing and expressing emotions in adaptive ways, and allows children to learn, socialise and engage in daily activities. Supporting children to develop emotion regulation strategies helps build their resilience and coping skills, giving them the resources to cope and succeed when faced with challenges. Resilience also helps to protect children from low mood, anxiety and other mental health problems that can arise during adolescence.

Students with disabilities or developmental delays often need extra support and time to learn emotion regulation skills. Some students (such as those with autism, intellectual disability, or oppositional defiant disorder) will find it hard to identify emotions and behave in socially appropriate ways. They may experience more outbursts, defiance and other challenging behaviours which may be caused by difficulties with emotion regulation.

Some children develop emotion regulation and resilience more independently, while others may need extra support to learn these skills. With the appropriate support children can learn to manage their emotions and develop into resilient adolescents.



Evidence-based strategies

Teach children about emotions

- **Teach children how to identify emotions.** This may involve lessons where children label emotions on pictures of faces. Help children to identify the emotions, and to then think about how they feel when they experience these emotions. For example, “How do you know when you are feeling happy, sad or mad?” AllPlay Learn’s emotions cards are a useful resource for identifying how emotions look and feel.
- **Talk about emotions with children.** Talking with children about the emotions they are feeling may help them learn to identify emotions and communicate how they are feeling. Consider sharing experiences when you were excited, frustrated or afraid to illustrate the situations and physical feelings related to emotions. Conversation about the causes and consequences of emotions can also be helpful.

Teach students a variety of skills to regulate emotions

- **Consider teaching students to reappraise the negatives.** Reappraisal involves thinking about a stressful or negative event from a different perspective. Reappraisal can help students reduce or change the emotional stress of negative events. Reappraisal might involve attempting to learn from the experience, or considering whether the situation is as bad as first thought. AllPlay Learn’s What is bullying story (pages 9 and 10) gives an example of removing emotion from a situation, and looking at a situation from a different point of view.
- **Support children in stressful situations.** Providing emotional warmth, support and encouraging students to express emotions during times of stress may teach students that emotions can be managed and are not permanent.
- **Show students how to distract themselves.** Distraction from intense emotions like anger or anxiety may help alleviate students’ stress. This could include getting a student to talk about something positive, going for a walk, taking a time out to calm down before responding, reading or listening to music.



Teach children to manage problems

- **Teach children to problem solve.** Encouraging students to plan and problem solve can help them find ways to change or cope with stressful events. Coming up with adaptive choices when faced with stressful problems is one of the most helpful skills to learn to help regulate our feelings. Support students to plan steps when faced with stressful or challenging situations such as identifying what a problem is, thinking of possible solutions, choosing the best solution, and thinking about whether it worked. Refer to AllPlay Learn's problem solving guide for more information on problem solving.
- **Support seeking.** It may help to encourage students to seek support when faced with stressful or challenging situations. Support seeking may involve emotional support to help students manage emotions like stress, anger or worry. It could also mean assisting students to find ways of solving social, emotional or academic problems. Support could include student services from the school or talking to their general practitioner.

Create a positive school and class environment

- **Build positive relationships with students.** Positive teacher-student relationships can encourage students to feel connected with their school. Feeling connected to school is associated with better emotion regulation and independence, which can in turn support resilience. Positive relationships involve warmth, trust and accepting and supporting students' emotions while setting appropriate limits on behaviour.
- **Encourage peer support.** Having peer support from friends may help students deal with school challenges, and be more comfortable asking teachers or peers for help. Encourage students to help each other, share things and care for one another.
- **Have a structured classroom.** This can help children actively deal with things that make them stressed, and seek help when they need. A structured classroom involves clear expectations and instructions, routines, guiding children through learning activities and giving opportunities for students to direct themselves. This helps students feel contained and safe as they know how things work and what is coming next.



- **Encourage pretend play.** Pretend play involves play where children act in different characters, pretend toys are real or imagine make-believe scenarios where emotional situations/events can be acted out. Regular pretend play with someone more experienced, like a teacher, 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.

Best practice tips

Focus on students strengths to build self-esteem

- Acknowledging students' unique abilities, strengths or interests regularly may encourage students to have a positive sense of self, building their resilience and ability to cope. Consider including a student's strengths in their learning goals or when using AllPlay Learn's evidence-based strategies. AllPlay Learn's [inclusive questions](#) outlines how strengths can be utilised with a student's goals.

Make the most of uncomfortable situations or emotions

- Uncomfortable situations and emotions can be opportunities for students to learn to manage emotions or cope with difficult experiences. Once a student has calmed down or a situation is resolved, discuss what emotions they felt and what actions they could take to prevent the situation occurring again or how to manage their emotions. Use AllPlay Learn's problem solving guide to support students to develop a plan for challenging situations.

Validate emotions

- If a student experiences an emotion that might be considered 'negative', let them know that it is okay to feel this emotion and they are not doing anything wrong by feeling that way. It may also help to let them know the emotion they are feeling is not permanent and will pass.



Emotion card games

- Emotion card games can help students learn to identify and describe emotions, as well as common ways of how emotions feel in their body. If a student is struggling to find words to describe how they feel, consider using AllPlay Learn's emotion cards as a way for them to communicate.

Other considerations

Safety

- Some children with less adaptive emotion regulation skills may engage in behaviours that are a danger to themselves or others.
- Consider all students safety if they experience intense anger, sadness or have meltdowns.
- Relaxation may help students calm down. Watch Elsternwick Primary School's story: Breathing and Relaxation below.

Behaviour

- Children with less adaptive emotion regulation skills may show more challenging behaviours at school such as outbursts, fighting or defiance towards teachers.
- 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.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour.
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Wellbeing

- Feelings of low mood and anxiety may be more common in children who experience complicated or challenging emotions regularly.
- Reappraisal, planning, and acceptance may help children manage strong emotions of sadness or worry.



- Monitor the wellbeing of children who appear to have sudden or significant changes in their mood, social life or school engagement.
- Support for children's wellbeing may include school wellbeing staff or a general practitioner
- Refer to AllPlay Learn's [anxiety](#) page if a student experiences ongoing worries or anxiety.

Transitions

- Some children may benefit from supports when moving across education settings.
- Teaching students a variety of skills to regulate emotions can support a child to become independent, resilient and better able to manage the transition.
- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning to a primary or secondary school setting access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).
- For children transitioning to primary school access AllPlay Learn's Story A school day, and for children transitioning to secondary school access Access AllPlay Learn's story How to be Organised

Other co-occurring conditions

- Children with emotion regulation challenges may also have challenges with [behaviour](#), [attention](#), [social skills](#) or [anxiety](#). Some students may also experience [oppositional defiant disorder](#), [intellectual disability](#), or [autism](#)
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.

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 children with emotion issues include our [supporting wellbeing resources](#), and:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Class schedule
- Student self-monitoring form
- Emotions cards
- Problem solving guide
- AllPlay Learn Story - Waiting my turn