

Emotions

About emotions and emotion regulation

Supporting students to develop emotion regulation skills will be important for many aspects of their lives, including in education and future employment settings, in their 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 with these skills.

Emotion regulation involves recognising, managing and expressing emotions in adaptive ways, and allows young people to learn, socialise and engage in daily activities. Supporting young people 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 young people from low mood, anxiety and other mental health problems, which 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 young people develop emotion regulation and resilience more independently, while others may need extra support to learn these skills. With the appropriate support young people can learn to manage their emotions and develop into resilient young adults.



Evidence-based strategies

Teach students a variety of skills to regulate emotions

- **Teach students to reappraise 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 story What is bullying and what to do about it (pages 9 and 10) gives an example of removing emotion from a situation, and looking at a situation from a different point of view. Access this story under relevant resources below.
- **Ask students to narrate experiences:** If a student experiences an event that makes them angry, narrating the experience back to you in detail may help to quickly reduce their anger. Ask them to tell you everything that happened, how they felt and what they learned.
- **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.
- **Encourage students to accept their emotions:** Encouraging students to accept all emotions whether viewed as positive or negative can be helpful. Thoughts such as "This isn't comfortable or pleasant, but I can accept it" or "This isn't the worst thing that could happen" may help students to accept emotionally distressing events. Teaching students that all emotions will pass and are not permanent can also help.
- **Teach students relaxation techniques:** Practising relaxation breathing with your students can support them in managing anxiety and calming down. Relaxation breathing might be particularly helpful before an activity that tends to cause a student to become stressed or anxious. You can watch an example of a breathing and relaxation exercise in a primary school setting on our primary teacher resources page. Refer to the [Anxiety page](#) to find more strategies to help students manage their anxiety.



Teach young people how to manage problems

- **Build problem solving skills:** Encouraging students to 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 under relevant resources below.
- **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

- **Promote independent learning:** Independent learning can be encouraged by listening and responding to students' wants and needs, supporting their motivations and providing opportunities for students to be make decisions on their own. Improving a student's sense of autonomy can help them learn to manage emotions independently and foster resilience.
- **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 resiliency. Positive relationships involve warmth, trust and accepting and supporting students' emotions while setting appropriate limits on behaviour.
- **Schedule regular positive activities:** Positive activities during lessons like short bursts of physical activity or classroom games may improve students' mood and school engagement.



Best practice tips

Focus on student 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](#) page 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 in relevant resources below, 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. Access the cards under relevant resources below.

Other considerations

Safety

- Some teens 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. You can watch an example of a breathing and relaxation exercise in a primary school setting on our [primary teacher resources page](#).

Behaviour

- Teens experiencing complicated emotions 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 teen is showing a behaviour, what they are trying to communicate with their behaviour and which strategies may help support them
- Encouraging teens to improve their problem solving skills may help them manage social, emotional or learning problems. Support teens to problem solve using AllPlay Learn's Problem Solving Guide under relevant resources.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the young person and promoting more helpful behaviour

Wellbeing

- Feelings of low mood and anxiety may be more common in teens who experience complicated or challenging emotions regularly
- Reappraisal and acceptance may help teens manage strong emotions of sadness or worry
- Monitor the wellbeing of teens who appear to have sudden or significant changes in their mood, social life or school engagement
- Support for teens' 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

- For more information about supporting students when transitioning across education settings, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).
- Post-school transition to adult life should begin as early as possible in school.
- Teaching students a variety of skills to regulate emotions can support a teenager to become independent, resilient and better able to manage the transition



- Aim to increase independence by working on organisational, social and problem-solving skills, and time- and self- management skills. Provide plenty of opportunities to practise them across a range of contexts.
- It may be helpful to identify skill gaps and develop a support plan to help them be successful (e.g. social skills, academic and/or employment skills).

Alcohol and drugs

- Some students with emotion regulation challenges may turn to alcohol or drugs to reduce feelings of low mood or anxiety. These students may benefit from referral to support agencies, such as the school welfare team or headspace.

Common co-occurring conditions

- Teens with emotion regulation challenges may also experience challenges with [behaviour](#), [attention](#), [social skills](#), [anxiety](#), [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:

- Problem solving guide
- Student self-monitoring form
- Emotions cards (A4)
- AllPlay Learn Story - What is bullying and what to do about it