

Supporting pupils to manage their emotions

Children who manage their emotions well do better socially and academically, and are less likely to suffer from mental health difficulties in later life. In this article, Rosie Eachus provides guidance for helping children to learn emotional management in the classroom.

Summary

- + Understanding why a child has difficulty regulating their emotional state is the first step towards helping them.
- + Many children with emotional regulation difficulties are also hypersensitive to sensory stimuli.
- + Children need to become aware of their own emotions.
- + Children need to be able identify things which help them relax.

We all experience emotions such as excitement, jealousy, fear or anger in response to different situations. And there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the emotion. Problems arise when someone responds inappropriately to an emotion.

Inappropriate responses to emotion tend to be either 'externalising' responses, such as aggression and tantrums, or 'internalising' responses where a child turns their reaction in on themselves and becomes withdrawn or depressed. Externalised responses are easily spotted, but internalised responses can be harder to notice.

There are many reasons why children may find it difficult to manage their own emotions.

Why emotional regulation can be difficult

Understanding why a child in your class is having particular difficulty regulating their emotional state is an important first step towards helping them. These are some examples.

- A child can be at a developmental level where emotional regulation is difficult. Pre-schoolers and teenagers, for example, often struggle with their own emotional regulation.
- Children with developmental delay may start (or finish) school with the emotion management skills of a much younger child.



- A child with an attachment disorder may not have experienced care-givers responding calmly and appropriately to emotions.
- Children with 'executive dysfunction', which often accompanies disorders such as ADHD and dyspraxia, may have difficulty inhibiting their response to an emotion.
- Children with autistic spectrum disorders often find it difficult to recognise emotions in themselves and others, so do not know how to respond appropriately.
- Children with language delays and disorders may have difficulties expressing themselves verbally so cannot explain how they are feeling.
- Stressed children are likely to find it more difficult to access their own coping mechanisms.

How to help

School staff really can help children learn to manage their emotions more effectively.

Teachers need to maintain a calm atmosphere in classrooms, and they are vital as role models - communicating assertively whilst treating everyone with respect.

Teaching older children assertive communication skills so that they can interact assertively, rather than aggressively or passively, is useful. Drama sessions modelling appropriate responses to particular situations, such as being left out of a game, can be helpful. Children need to practise managing emotions in a 'safe' environment. Peer relationships are very important for the well-being of young people, so supporting their social skills by teaching them to listen and take turns is useful.

Schools should also consider the demands they make on pupils. A timetable change can provoke anxiety, so prepare pupils for change with visual timetables or Social Stories. More information about Social Stories is available online at <http://bit.ly/2nZeFQP>.

“*Children need to practise managing emotions in a 'safe' environment.*”

Many children with emotional regulation difficulties are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli. This means, for example, that after a morning of working hard in a classroom, the auditory bombardment of a school dining hall may be just too much. If trying to concentrate in class, a pupil who is hypersensitive to sensory stimuli may find a flickering light or repetitive outside noise tips them into a deregulating state. The sudden loud noise of a school bell or fire alarm can be the last straw for a child who is working very hard to concentrate. It is vital to ensure that school-work demands are at an appropriate level: the anxiety experienced when some children feel they cannot do their work can be a trigger for deregulation.

Similarly, it is important to be aware of physical triggers such as being too hot, or feelings of hunger or tiredness which can make it difficult for children to regulate their emotions appropriately.

Finding out an individual's triggers and trying to minimise them is very important.

Self-regulation strategies

Children need to become aware of their own emotions. Start by helping them recognise physical tension. Then, a system of three boxes labelled with a happy face, an 'I'm ok' face and a sad face is useful. When children come into class in the morning or after lunch, they put their name into one of the three boxes. The teacher can ask any child who has put their name in the happy box if they would like to celebrate whatever has made them happy with their class. Similarly, if a child has put their name into the sad-face box, the teacher can ask them quietly if they would like to talk about anything that is making them feel bad.

Older pupils might respond better to being provided with 'feelings wristbands'. These have a green side which they can wear to signal they are feeling okay, and an orange side to signal they are not feeling too good about something.

Another alternative is a 'Blob Tree', the concept developed by Pip Wilson. These are posters of trees with lots of simple cartoon figures carrying out different

activities, ranging from swinging on a rope to sitting curled up on a branch away from everyone else. Children can be asked to identify themselves with a 'Blob' picture. This then paves the way for a discussion about why they are feeling like that particular 'Blob.'

Teachers should make a point of labelling emotions, asking children how classmates and characters in stories or videos might be feeling. Label the feelings accurately, rather than resorting simply to 'he's in a bad mood.'

Create a stress-busting toolkit

Children identify things which help them relax and create a series of cards with their own ideas on. This means they could have cards with a picture, for example, of a trampoline, or they could write suggestions on cards such as 'walk around the field', 'sing a song,' or 'count backwards from a hundred'.

Noise-reducing headphones in class can help children stay calm.

Alternatively, hearing peers talk about ideas which help them to manage their emotions can give ideas to children struggling with emotional regulation.

Then, children need to explore their 'toolkit' and try out different ideas.

They can keep the ideas that work on cards in their pocket.

Teachers can keep a stack of cards with suggestions on for children to try if they identify that they feel bad about something.

The deregulating child

It is useful to have a quiet, safe place where a very stressed child can retire. This needs to be an area with soft cushions and no stimulation on the walls where the child can feel safe. When children are actually having a 'meltdown', talking rarely helps. Give them space and quiet and, only once they are calm again, consider discussing the event, the trigger and how they felt. Social Stories can be used to help a child learn how to behave appropriately in particular situations which are likely to be stressful for an individual.

Learning to regulate emotions is a vital part of growing up, and there is a lot schools can do to support their pupils as they learn.



Toolkit

Use the following items in the Toolkit to help you put the ideas in this article into practice:

- Handout – How teachers can support emotional regulation (page 30)



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