



MEDICA CPD

Supporting Children to Understand and Regulate Their Emotions

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Effective emotional regulation is a key skill required by all children to enable them to thrive. Research shows that children who are able to understand and regulate their emotions are happier, healthier and do better in school (1). There are several simple ways that adults can support children in understanding and regulating their emotions, and it's never too young to start; you just need to adapt your language to suit the age and stage of the child or children you're supporting.

Give feelings names

The first thing we need to do is to create a shared understanding of what we're actually talking about. If we're going to talk about different emotions and how to respond to them, we need to give them names or labels that make sense to the child. It's hard to ask for help with something you can't name. Naming feelings and perhaps bringing them to life using animals, colours or characters (the cast of Inside Out can be a great conversation starter here) provides children with the building blocks for emotional regulation.

How do feelings feel?

Help children to explore how feelings manifest physically – where in their body do they feel different emotions? How does their heart, head, tummy or hands feel when they are happy, sad, angry or lonely? There are no right and wrong answers – the aim here is to help children not to be afraid of the, sometimes strange, physical sensations that can come with different feelings. Recognising the physical cues for difficult feelings such as fear or anger can also help us to recognise and respond to how we're feeling. Additionally, learning to recognise their body's cues that big feelings are brewing, can help children to seek support or find emotional outlets before they enter a state of overwhelm.

Feeling vs behaviour

It's important that children understand that all feelings are acceptable – but that not all behaviours are. Think with children about the different ways in which we might appropriately act in response to different feelings and why this might be hard sometimes. It can be fun here to imagine what it would be like if grown-ups acted like toddlers – who tend to act directly on their feelings. What if teachers and parents threw tantrums on supermarket floors? Why do adults and children respond differently to their feelings, and is this always a good thing? Even with very young children we can explore how sometimes we have BIG difficult feelings that we need to find a healthy outlet for.

Explore a range emotional outlets

We want to encourage healthy processing and expression of emotions – so whilst some behaviours such as shouting, hitting, biting, scratching and screaming might not be acceptable, we need to think about how we can healthily and safely manage our big feelings if they do threaten to overwhelm us. Let the child be the guide here, but prompt with ideas that draw on the senses, simple things like writing or drawing the source of anger and tearing it up, or using poster paints to get our feelings onto paper, or jumping up and down can help children to healthily let out how they're feeling.

Encourage children to look out for the early cues that their body gives them that their feelings are beginning to bubble up, and consider together how best to respond.

Role Model

Finally, we can all act as role models for children. We need not just to teach them about emotional regulation, but to show them too. As well as naming our feelings aloud and role modelling different ways of managing our emotions, we can also role model reflection and problem-solving. Encourage children to learn from moments when they became overwhelmed by reflecting on them in moments of calm and thinking about what could be done differently next time. Consider too, whether there are moments when you failed to keep your own emotions in check. An angry outburst from an adult can be a great learning opportunity for a child if we apologise in a moment of calm and talk about how we were feeling and what we might be able to do differently next time.

Emotional regulation is a skill for life and one that, with support, will develop and evolve over time. Keep revisiting it and seize learning opportunities as they arise. Acknowledge and praise the moments when a child shows good understanding of their thoughts and behaviours or when they manage difficult feelings well; and use times of calm to revisit and learn from the moments when things didn't go quite to plan.

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References

- 1) Snezhana Djambazova-Popordanoska (2016) Implications of emotion regulation on young children's emotional wellbeing and educational achievement, *Educational Review*, 68:4, 497-515

You can hear more from Pooky Knightsmith at our Annual Children's Mental Health Conference. For more information or to book call 0141 638 4098 or visit our website www.medicacpd.com