

Calm, Alert, **AND** Ready to Learn

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Calm, Alert, and Ready to Learn

How to Help Your Child Self-Regulate

Do you ever wonder why kids behave the way they do? They can be so difficult to get along with at times. At other times, they behave perfectly well.

Children's behaviour is affected by how they feel emotionally and physically. It is harder for kids to manage their behaviour and cope with stress when they are tired, hungry, excited, or restless.

When children misbehave, we often think they need discipline. And kids do need discipline sometimes. However, this booklet is about another way to understand and respond to children's behaviour: self-regulation.

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt our physical and emotional energy and our thinking and social skills when we need to. Self-regulation helps us to control our behaviour, handle challenges, and manage stress.

Supporting Our Children

Good parenting helps children develop the ability to self-regulate. We do this by being aware of when a child's physical and emotional energy is not right for the situation and helping them change that energy. That is what happens when you take a toddler in your arms to comfort her, or when you make a cranky child laugh to cheer him up. Other times children need help to release excess energy, calm down, or relax.

This kind of support builds self-regulation. It helps children recognize what it feels like to be in a calm and alert state, emotionally and physically. It also shows them what it feels like to return to a calm and alert state after being excited or upset. Our goal as parents is to teach children to understand and manage their physical state and their feelings in various situations.

This booklet will help you better understand self-regulation. It will also show you strategies you can use to build your children's self-regulation and help them be the best they can be.



Self-Regulation in the Body

Self-regulation helps us manage our behaviour in several ways. In the most basic way, it helps us manage the combination of energy and tension we feel in our bodies. This combination tells us how excited, relaxed, alarmed, alert, or safe we feel.

Our bodies respond automatically to situations. For example, if we need to run from an attacker, our body produces adrenaline to help us run faster. When the threat is over, a special nerve turns on a “brake” that slows our heartbeat and allows us to calm down. These automatic responses are not as well developed in children. The care and comfort of adults actually helps them work properly.

As we mature, our brains and bodies get better at maintaining the ideal level of energy needed for different situations. We learn to recognize when our energy levels are too low or too high, and we learn how to change them. For example, we might take a shower to wake up or listen to music to relax. We also become better at coping with tasks even when we don’t feel our best.

Children have some ability to deal with stress and challenges, but sometimes the effort is exhausting and they cannot cope. When children’s levels of energy and tension don’t match what is needed in a situation, they can’t control their behaviour and emotions well.

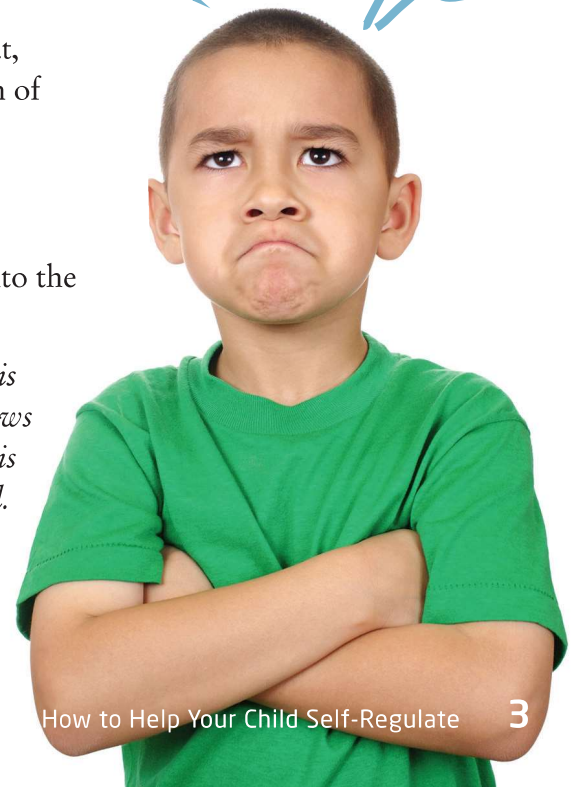
Eight-year-old Dustin is excited about being at the fair. It’s a hot day and Dustin is tired and hungry, but he wants a turn on the bumper cars. After a long wait, the man tells Dustin he’s too small to ride by himself. Dustin has been counting on riding alone. He throws himself on the ground crying. It’s the biggest tantrum he’s ever had.

Is he spoiled? No. Is he feeling overwhelmed? Yes. The heat, fatigue, excitement, hunger, and Dustin’s long wait drained him of his ability to deal with disappointment.

Helping Kids Slow Down

Children often need us to help them get their level of energy into the right state for a situation.

It’s bedtime on Halloween night and six-year-old Madison is having a hard time winding down for sleep. Her father knows that telling Madison to go to sleep will not help because she is too excited. Yelling at her would make her even more excited. Instead, he sits on Madison’s bed, puts his arm around her, and starts telling her a story in a quiet, soothing voice.





Madison’s dad is helping Madison lower her level of excitement with his quiet presence and comforting physical contact. This helps Madison to learn when her level of energy needs to be slowed down and that it *can* be slowed down.

Helping Kids Get Energized

When children feel tired, listless, or bored, it is difficult for them to find the mental or physical energy a situation requires. They often need our help to feel more energized or excited. We can help them get interested and excited about what they are doing. This gives them the energy they need to complete the task.

“Hey Sammy, let’s see how many toys you can put away in one minute. I’ll set the timer and you can race against the clock.”

Sam’s mom could argue with him about clean-up time. Instead, she helps him get interested and find more energy by turning clean-up time into a game.

Helping kids feel calm, alert, and energized when they need to be is a key part of how we help them develop self-regulation skills. Eventually, we can start teaching children how to “regulate” themselves. We do this by helping them identify their own energy level and what they can do to feel better. For example, we might say, *“You’re really wound up right now. What could we do to help you slow down?”* This can help children learn how to understand and change their inner energy and tension.

The Starting Point

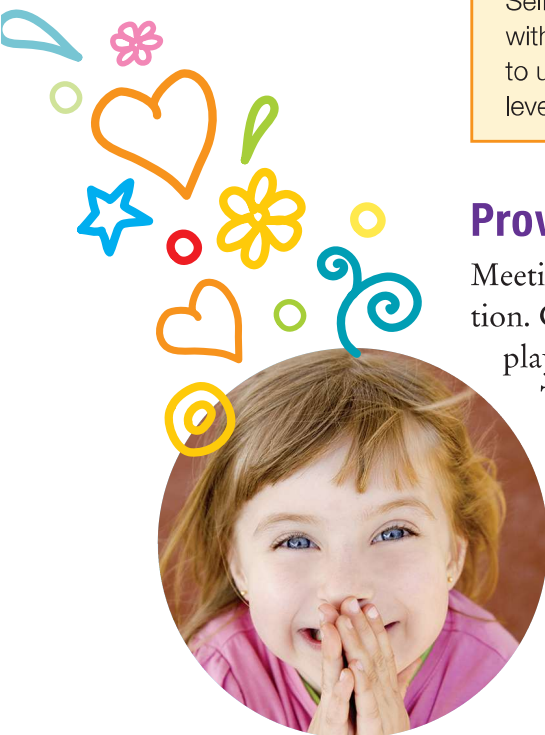
Self-regulation in the body affects all the other areas of behaviour. To deal with children’s anger, attention problems, or lack of cooperation, you need to understand how they feel in their bodies. Helping children adjust their levels of energy and tension often helps them behave better.

Providing Good Care and Support

Meeting children’s basic needs is a big part of supporting self-regulation. Good care includes a healthy diet, enough sleep, exercise, and free play. When children are not well cared for they feel uneasy inside.

They burn a lot of energy coping with that feeling. Good care also shows children how to care for themselves.

Good relationships are very important. Connection with parents and other people they love and depend on makes children feel good. This feeling helps them face the world with a positive attitude. That’s why small children sometimes take your hand or crawl up in your lap. They are seeking a physical connection that helps them feel safe, calm, and happy.



Some Children Need More

For some children it is more difficult to regulate their levels of energy and tension. These children are often more easily upset and more difficult to calm down than other kids. They are less able to control their behaviour and cope with stress.

Why some kids and not others? It's partly because these kids have to burn more energy to manage their feelings. This constant drain of energy makes it harder for them to stay in a calm and alert state. It becomes more difficult for them to pay attention, resist impulses, be patient, and exert mental effort.

There is no magic solution for these children. It will take them longer to develop self-regulation skills. But they can do it with our help. Read more about how we can help on page 15.

Tips for Calming Children

- Give your child a lot of physical contact, such as hugging them or holding hands with younger children.
- Make sure that your child has plenty of quiet one-on-one time with you.
- Limit noise and clutter. Both can distract children and make it hard for them to concentrate.
- Give children something to do with their hands, such as playing with Plasticine, a fidget toy, or a string of beads.
- Teach them the benefits of taking deep breaths to relax.
- Encourage them to do physical activity (for example, run, skip, jump) when they are restless or can't sit still.



Tips for Energizing Children

- Change your tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures when interacting with your child.
- Turn a task into a game.
- Have your child do a physical activity that uses large muscles, such as lifting objects that strengthen but do not strain muscles.
- Ensure children have a lot of outdoor time.
- Play lively music.

