



Emotion Regulation: Managing Intense Feelings Sober

Parents often tell us that their child is “self medicating” with alcohol or other drugs. One of the goals of treatment is to teach coping skills while also connecting families to clinicians who can provide the appropriate medications (if necessary).

Learning to manage intense feelings can seem difficult. It can be terrifying to experience these feelings if you are used to reaching for a drink or a “hit” any time something doesn’t feel right. Everyone can learn emotion regulation and can practice to get better.

What is Emotion Regulation?

Emotion regulation is the ability to manage the extremes of emotion. Young kids often have temper tantrums that involve kicking and screaming. We hope by adulthood that they have developed the skills to deal with their once overwhelming feelings in a less harmful way.

The pre-frontal cortex controls emotional regulation. It is not fully developed until young adulthood – in the mid 20s. So teens and young adults are still not done developing – just one reason [alcohol](#)

and other [drug](#) use is so harmful to them.

What does Emotion Regulation Look Like?

Emotion regulation can look different throughout a person's life. Babies might suck their thumbs. Younger children may hug a favorite stuffed animal when they get upset. Older children could read or journal. Teens and adults sometimes reach out to a friend on the phone. Learning different coping skills for each stage of life is an important part of emotion regulation. [PLEASE Skills](#) can help encourage emotion regulation.

Teaching Emotion Regulation

Where do intense feelings come from?

When kids get excited (positively or negatively), it's a sign that they are acting on impulse. Some kids (like those with ADHD) are more apt to respond this way. Younger children are also more likely to be impulsive. The higher thinking part of the brain (the pre-frontal cortex) isn't always able to engage quickly enough to take control of the situation. Let kids know the following information, remembering that some of this information is better for younger or older kids:

- Intense feelings are normal.
- Your feelings belong to you.
- If you are having an overly intense feeling, you may need to take a little break until the calmer part of your brain can help you out.
- Learn and practice calming techniques when you are already calm in order to be prepared.
- Techniques you learn to get you through an upset time, will strengthen your brain pathways. Over time, you will become better at calming yourself down.

Calming Techniques

- Breathing techniques are great calming tools. Some ideas for younger kids can be found

in this [printable](#).

- Reading, crafting/creating, writing, exercising, and talking to a friend or family member can all be good calming techniques.
- During a calm and quiet time, help your child create a list of activities that help them feel calmer. Hang this list in a central location as a reminder of what to do during stressful times.
- Teach children and teens other techniques (like positive self talk or staying present in the moment) that they may not already know how to do.

Mindfulness

[Mindfulness](#) is a skill that strengthens the brain's pathways to calmer responses. It helps kids and adults react less automatically or impulsively. It also strengthens the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for making mature decisions. Practice mindfulness when you take a walk or get out in nature. Take time to notice what is happening around you for a moment, rather than always being goal oriented.

Be Age Appropriate

Keep in mind that young children are less able to control their emotions than older children. This is a skill that will continue to develop over a person's whole life. Even as adults, we sometimes lose our cool, and kids are even more likely to struggle. Don't punish kids for having a lapse in emotion regulation. You wouldn't punish your child for not being able to write their name at 2 years old, or for being unable to drive a car at 12. This is a learned skill that everyone needs to practice to master it. Some people are naturally more able to regulate emotions compared to others, just as some are able to ride a bike earlier. Once kids and teens have the basics down, they begin to take ownership over their reactions, and they will be more likely to work for calmer responses.

When to Jump In

Parents sometimes rush to fix everything for their children. How many of us have said, "I just want them to be happy!"? We can't force an emotion onto our children. When we rush to soothe kids every time they are upset, they lose the opportunity to learn to self manage. Give your child the tools to get calmer, offer support (hugs, conversations, etc.), and remind them of their calming ideas, but remember that people often learn more when they have to fix something themselves.

Be Calm for Them

Showing kids how to work out problems without losing your cool is a good way to model emotion

regulation. This means talking through your emotions as you are trying to calm down. An example might be: If your child comes home with a poor grade on a test, you could tell them, "I'm feeling really upset and disappointed about this right now. I'm going to make some tea to help me calm down. In 15 minutes we are going to talk about what happened and create a plan to do better in the future."

This is a way to support them and their efforts to learn to regulate their emotions, provide a solution to get calmer (making tea, reading, etc.), and coming back to the problem in a timely manner when you've had a minute to think. It doesn't ignore the problem, and it requires the child to help solve the difficulty, while also modeling how to be calm in a stressful situation.

Provide a Scaffold

Scaffolding is a teaching technique that bridges between what a student can already do with where you want them to be. In this context, it means helping your child solve the problem in real time (as much as possible) by meeting them where they are and providing additional resources as needed. If your child is having a problem cleaning their room and begins to throw a fit, you could approach the problem several ways. Some parents might begin to yell or lecture; others might clean up the room themselves to get it done faster. A good technique to try here, is to walk the child through the problem and some possible solutions.

Make sure you are reflecting their issue and concerns, so they know that you are hearing them. ("I hear that you don't want to clean up your room. You don't think it's fair that this is your job right now.") See if they have any ideas to make the task easier or more fun. Make some appropriate suggestions if they need help. (Some of my family's favorites for this common situation include: picking up everything that is a certain color, putting on music and seeing how much is put away before the end of the song, and doing fun movement after putting away every 5 items.) After the room is cleaned up, discuss ideas for not making such a mess next time. When it happens again, maybe they will remember some of the techniques you tried or suggested.

Start Now

You don't need to wait until your child has an emotional outburst to begin teaching emotion regulation. Start by making a list of things that encourage calm behavior. Work on deep breathing, including some of the "fun" variations. Begin making moments of mindfulness a more regular part

of your life. Over time, your child will become better at emotional regulation with practice and maturity.