

April 2021

Pondering Parenting

Every month SMFCSD's Counselor Wellness Team will share with you stories and guidance based in the 3R's: Routines, Relationships and Regulation, to help your family navigate the everyday puzzles that arise in supporting your learner(s).

Regulation Station: Teaching Children to Self-Soothe

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The Challenge:

We all express our emotions and regulate ourselves in different ways, and in times of stress, we may have a more difficult time recognizing and managing our complex feelings. Your children may not be aware of all the emotions they are feeling within their own bodies and may have difficulty handling intense or difficult emotions on their own. Building opportunities to routinely practice naming emotions and self-soothing can help you and your child better prepare for whatever life brings your way.

Relationships

As a parent, modeling can play a pivotal role in teaching children how to self-regulate. When children see people they love and trust identifying their emotions and calming their bodies down, they start viewing these behaviors as both normal and important.

- Relationships are so crucial for children to be able to develop healthy ways to cope with intense emotions. In order for them to learn effectively, they may need to repeatedly watch their caregiver display calm-down behaviors. It is important to note that it is both easier and more effective to be taught these regulating skills by someone who is managing their emotions effectively themselves. Take time as a parent/caregiver to care for yourself and practice self-soothing strategies, too. When you are a dependable, calming, regulated presence, you are able to quickly recognize and manage stressful moments with your child and stay better connected in your relationship.
- Starting as young as infants, some children have a difficult time self-soothing and controlling their temper. These struggles can continue or get worse as they grow older. Sometimes it is hard for adults to keep their cool with an explosive child, so they give in to their child's demands rather than risking a tantrum. If parents give in too often to children when they act out, kids may develop the habit of relying on their parents as external tools to calm down as opposed to learning how to manage intense feelings on their own. Practicing self-soothing with them when they are not upset can help them be

less reliant on you in those moments of conflict and stress, and can help you to model the skills they are working on developing.

- Talk with your child about times you have felt out of control or like your emotions have taken charge of your body. These conversations can help children see intense emotions as common and understandable, and can lead to conversations about the importance of practicing calm-down behaviors. Further, these conversations can build a “we” approach toward practicing self-regulation as a family and can strengthen your bond with your child.

Routines

Building self-regulation techniques into family routines can help strengthen these skills and your child’s comfort using them later on.

- Learning to self-soothe is a skill just like learning to read or ride a bike. It takes practice, so build regulation into your daily routine. For example, start each morning with some mindfulness exercises, like meditation or breathwork. Or, perhaps try exercises such as mindful eating with your family during dinner. It takes practicing these skills often for them to be effective when we truly need them.
- Trying to learn a skill while upset can be nearly impossible. Learning to self-regulate when you’re already upset is like learning to play the violin during a performance: very difficult and extremely frustrating. Practicing these skills with your children when they are calm makes the skills easier to remember when they are upset. Having regular, planned, daily or weekly practice times can also help children know what to expect. Asking them to practice self-soothing skills at an unexpected time might be a stressor that could lead to a tantrum.
- Plan your family regulation practice near times or situations that may be frustrating for your child. If transitioning from activity to activity is hard, such as stopping video games to eat dinner, then make a plan to practice these skills before each transition. This is a great way to try these skills in more low-stakes situations and build them into your routine. Your children will develop the ability to use these strategies later for other transitions with a quick reminder from you.

Regulation

Our bodies are designed to keep us safe from danger and this starts with being rested and well fed.

- As simple as it may sound, regulation often starts with our bodies, especially for children who can have a difficult time naming their emotions. Keeping regular mealtimes, eating balanced meals, going to sleep at the same time each night, and getting enough sleep can set kids up for success to keep their cool in the face of something not going their way.
- As human beings, when our bodies reach a place where we are not able to regulate properly, our brains “flip their lid,” so to speak. The areas of the brain that would help make decisions and calm down are no longer in control. This is where techniques like mindful breathing and progressive muscle relaxation can be helpful in getting our

thinking-brain back in charge. This is another reason why it is so important to practice these skills when your child is regulated, so it can be easier to access when they need it.

- Try different techniques to see what works best for your family in different situations. Grounding techniques like using each of our five senses may be helpful when your child is anxious, but doing some pushes against a sturdy wall may work better when they are angry. Finding techniques that work best for each child like belly breathing or others presented in the articles below can help everyone feel regulated and in control. Most importantly, practice makes progress toward a calmer and happier child and family.

Additional Resources

Videos

- Why Do We Lose Control of Our Emotions
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc&t=41s>
- La tortuga (Cuento para trabajar el autocontrol) - Técnica de Psicología Infantil - Minders
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rivGSIUkXR&t=133s>
- ENSEÑA a tu Hijo a Gestionar sus Emociones con la Ruleta de la Calma
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WjEEG4A-MI>

Articles:

- <https://childmind.org/article/can-help-kids-self-regulation/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/strategies-for-teaching-kids-self-regulation>
- https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UzrFq5W9IAHHxs_4I9sSEedjm9wdnUQi/view
- https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Az72WZTpAhKa1gyEXGqor_hcwb5VqgkW40Y1hVetZsk/edit?usp=sharing