



Emotion Regulation in the Early Years

Samantha Asher - Early Years
Neurodiversity Specialist



In this short article I will explore the question 'how can I help my child to regulate their emotions?'. I will discuss the three strands to developing self-regulation: understanding, recognising and regulating. As our little ones are still in the very early stages of developing regulation skills, the main focus of the article will be around supporting them to understand their emotions. It is also important to keep in mind that emotional development doesn't always fall in line with chronological age.

What is Emotional Regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behaviour related to the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional responses to upsetting situations, to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to a change in expectations, and to handle frustration without an outburst. It is important that we remember that these skills are still developing in the early years. We can support our children in the early years by supporting them to understand and recognise their emotions, this is called co-regulation.



The Limbic Brain

Behaviour is a form of communication. When our little ones are struggling with their emotions, we need to think about where they might be functioning in the brain and what they might be trying to

communicate to us. Children in the early years are still developing this and it is highly likely that they will be functioning out of the limbic part of the brain: fight, flight or freeze. When this occurs, we need to help them return to calm. In the early years we like to call this “chilling the chimp”.



Understanding Emotions

It is really important that we embed an understanding of emotions to our children. This will then provide them with the skills to begin to recognise their feelings and in turn regulate them.

Research shows that children who understand their emotions are able to form stronger friendships, calm themselves quickly when they are upset, perform better in school, have fewer negative thoughts and can regulate emotions. Therefore, it is vital we embed this understanding in the early years.

Tips for supporting this at home:

- Being attuned to your child, this means looking out for changes in body language, facial expressions, posture.
- Labelling the emotions when you see them “I think you are feeling happy”, “I think you are feeling cross”. This is called emotion coaching and is key at this stage of development.
- Using language within the home to support an understanding of emotional language. Naming emotions is the first step in helping our children to identify them. **Do this as a family, emotions affect everyone, not just the child!**
- Use a range of emotions e.g. happy, sad, calm.
- Using mirrors around the house to develop this understanding. Children may pull faces in the mirror whilst brushing their teeth, use this as a fun opportunity to label these emotions.
- Using books to support the development of emotional language. Bedtime reading would provide a lovely opportunity for this. Stop the book as you are reading and discuss how the character might be feeling.



Recognising Emotions

Once our children have developed a good understanding of emotions and the language, we can support them to begin to recognise their own emotions. Once able to recognise their emotions they are a step closer to being able to regulate them.

Tips for supporting this at home:

- Labelling the emotions when you see them, but this time link the emotion to the physical response “I think you are feeling happy because you are smiling”, “I think you are feeling cross because you are shouting”.

- A fun way to do this is to draw around your child outside with chalk and then choose an emotion. Draw/label on the body what might happen when they are feeling that way.
- Provide your child with a selection of pictures that show emotions. Allow your child to choose one to show you how they are feeling. Make this a regular opportunity not just when the child appears upset.

Regulating Emotions

Finally, we can support our children to begin to regulate their emotions. It is so important that we remember that our children are still developing these skills in the early years, so it will still require lots of adult support: co-regulation.

When our children are functioning out of the limbic part of the brain we need to provide them with lots of opportunities to ‘chill the chimp’.

Tips for supporting this at home:

- Provide your child with a cosy corner in the home that they can access when they are feeling overwhelmed. This may be a tent, a den under the bed or behind a sofa (a space that is safe). Keep in mind children will find it tricky to reason or discuss emotions when they are functioning out of this part of the brain.
- Mindfulness activities can support your child as this stage. You may want to provide your child with a box that has these resources in.
- Sensory activities e.g. messy play, resistance bands, play-do, Lego, physical activities.
- Some children can find weighted resources supportive.



Key Points to Remember:

- Emotional age and chronological age aren't always the same
- We all talk about emotions and don't just direct it at our children
- Label the range of emotions, not just angry and sad.



- Our children will need lots of support with this in the early years based on where they are developmentally.
- This is a process towards self-regulation and it can take time.