



## Understanding the stress response and promoting regulating behaviour

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For some children, it can be difficult for them to understand how their body reacts to stress and how to regulate and manage some of the big feelings associated with it. This information sheet will explore the human stress response and how we can support our children to develop skills in self regulation.

### So, what is stress?

Stress is our body's primitive response to any kind of demand or threat. When we feel in danger, the body's defences produce a rapid response known as the fight, flight or freeze reaction or the "stress response." When this happens, the body becomes ready to fight, run away or camouflage from the imminent danger and we experience a physical reaction. For some people they may experience sweaty palms, body shakes or fast breathing. For others they may experience disruptions in digestion, tunnel vision or auditory exclusion. Every person will experience the stress response in a way that is unique to them. It's important that we support our children to recognise how their own body responds when they experience some of their big feelings.

### How do I get my child to understand how their body responds to stress?

Coaching children to understand their emotions can often be a good place to start. Label your child's emotion and physical reaction when you believe they are experiencing them. You could say "I think that you are worried as your biting your bottom lip" or "I think that you are angry because your face is turning red." By labelling the range of different emotions and the physical response, we are supporting

our children to not only understand the emotional language but to also begin to recognise their bodies response. We can also model this approach by labelling how we are feeling or how the other adults around us may be feeling. Once your child is able to understand and recognise emotions and feelings, we can then support them to regulate.

## What can I do to support my child to develop skills in self-regulation?

A lovely activity that you could start with is getting your child to lie down on a big piece of paper and draw around the outline of their body. Your child can colour in their body outline and be as creative as they like with the outfits. Once the outline is established, we begin to ask the child certain questions and invite them to label their answers on the drawing. Some questions that you might wish to ask:



- When you feel excited, whereabouts do you get the feeling in your body?
- If you are feeling sad what happens to your body?
- When you are angry how does your body react?

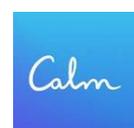
Some children may need supporting with this. A great way of encouraging your child would be to do an outline of your own body or maybe other family members and label the feelings for you/them. If your child sees that we all experience the range of emotions, they may feel more at ease to engage.

Once we have recognised the child's response to stress, we can start to begin to introduce some strategies to manage that feeling. Below are some strategies that may be useful:

Teach relaxation - breathing techniques can support a child to calm the fight, flight or freeze response. There are some really useful apps now available and links on YouTube that encourage children to breathe and relax.



STOP, BREATHE  
& THINK KIDS



Challenge thinking – supporting children to challenge their negative thinking can be a useful way for children to work through and manage their thoughts. A helpful way to do this is to identify what it is that your child is worrying about and ask them a series of questions. For example:

- Is this thought helpful?
- What evidence do you have that this is likely to happen?
- If your friend had this worry, what advice would you give them?

- Is this a fact or your opinion?

Once we have asked the “questions to challenge thinking” we can then support the child to reframe the thought and come up with a new way of looking at it. Writing it down on paper can often make it feel a more concrete and easier to process.

Getting rid of the fuzzies – many children will need the opportunity to get rid of some of the physical build up that the stress response creates. Activities that encourage children to assert pressure or move may be helpful. For example:

- Jumping on the trampoline.
- Pushing hands/feet against a wall.
- Resistance bands to pull and twist.
- Push ups.
- Sensory circuits.
- Weighted resources.



## What do I do if my child becomes overwhelmed by their stress response?

It can be really upsetting when our children become overwhelmed by their big feelings and often a difficult time for us to offer our support to them as they are struggling to regulate their emotional response. **Some tips that may be useful:**

- Early on in behaviour, before your child loses control, techniques in distraction may be useful. Redirecting your child’s attention to focus on something new may be helpful to change the direction of the behaviour.
- Validating your child’s feelings using emotion coaching statements may support your child to feel understood “I think that you are feeling anxious.”
- If your child is unable to be redirected and becomes overwhelmed by their emotions, think fight, flight or freeze.
- Reduce language to reduce the stress load for your child.
- Make sure that your child is safe, be available but reduce attention.
- Allow time for your child to self-calm.
- Maintain a calm tone of voice and acknowledge their feelings “I can see that you got angry and now you’re feeling upset.”
- Label the child’s behaviour (it’s important to not label the child).
- When appropriate explain the consequences to the child’s actions.
- If needed offer a relaxation technique to support regulation.