

Emotional regulation skills for teens need to be taught both explicitly and via role modeling.

They play a big part in helping to create happy, resilient adults.

By Linda Stade, 2017

I have to admit; I'm fascinated by a toddler tantrum. I can understand why they are so distressing to parents, but it is an incredible thing to watch. It doesn't seem possible that one so small could muster that much energy and throw it out like a force field around themselves.

I admire the commitment of the act. The brain's base instincts bursting forth and overtaking everything else. It makes me wonder about the effort we must expend as adults in keeping all that emotion under control because, to some degree, it is still in there somewhere.

We expect emotional outbursts from very young children, but by the time they are in their tweens and teens we expect them to be controlled and self-managing. It is a big ask...and unrealistic. Emotional maturity takes a long time. The brain only reaches an adult state in a person's early twenties.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN TEENS

There are times in this development where the experience of emotion is multiplied by the impact of hormones. When these chemicals first flood the brain at around age two and then again during puberty, all hell can break loose.

We tend to underestimate how often a child has to self-regulate over the course of a day. We don't notice because we are so good at it and we forget what it was like to not have those skills down pat. Think about it...

- Wake up and work up the enthusiasm for school
- Sibling interactions that may be competitive and raw
- Boredom on the bus
- Walk past a student who has upset you the day before

- Get called on by the teacher when you don't know the answer
- Excitement at getting a text from a girl/boy you like
- Do poorly on a test
- Disappointment at not making the netball team
- Frustration about a new Math concept
- Last period on a Friday over excitement
- And on and on and on...
- Transitions are particularly challenging and school is all about transitions. Every hour high school students stand up, change rooms, adapt to the expectations of a new teacher, tackle completely different content and make social adjustments based on who is in the class. It's exhausting.
- It is little wonder kids often feel grumpy and spent after school. Remember, they are also in uniforms, often not comfortable and certainly not their choice. Truth be told, I know I'd be a more relaxed soul if I could come to school in sandals and sweatpants. Kids are the same.

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS OF EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

According to Alice Boyes PhD, there are ten skills of emotional self-regulation that we need to master by the time we are adults.

1. Identifying which specific emotions you're feeling.
2. Identifying which specific emotions someone else is feeling.
3. The ability to start and persist in pursuing goals even when you feel anxious.
4. The ability to tolerate awkwardness.
5. The ability to have intimate conversations rather than stonewall, avoid, or flee.
6. The ability not to crumble when someone is pressuring you.
7. The ability to soothe your own emotions.
8. The ability to soothe other people's emotions.

9. The ability to not go over the top with positive emotion.

10. The ability to delay gratification.

I would argue that an understanding of the additional factors that negatively impact our emotional regulation is also very important. Factors such as lack of sleep, lack of exercise, hunger, drug use and alcohol use.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF KIDS LEARNING EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

A problem we are beginning to recognize is that recent parenting and educational practices are getting in the way of the development of sound emotional regulation. This is happening in two main ways:

Over the past 30 years, we have become increasingly worried about children's confidence and self-esteem. These are valid concerns but they have led to a situation where we now try to remove failure and conflict from our children's lives.

We have sports competitions where we aren't allowed to have winners and losers, so we don't keep score. We try to engineer friendships for our kids and sort out their conflicts for them. Perhaps we recall our own emotional dysregulation, and we think we can save our children from those feelings.

On the flip side, some parents believe in 'tough love'. The 'harden up princess', 'You're okay' approach. The problem with that is emotional regulation relies on a connection with parents.

Parents need to be talking to kids about what emotions are, what purpose they serve and how to regulate them. A lot of this is done via role modelling and creating a space where it is safe to talk about feelings, both your own and your child's.

MALADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

When a child doesn't learn appropriate self-regulation, they can take on maladaptive strategies instead. These are harmful behaviors that in one way or another either numb the experience of

emotion, channel it into another form of manageable pain or avoid feeling altogether. Some of the most common maladaptive behaviors are:

- Avoidance of emotion
- ‘Acting out’
- Withdrawal
- Aggression
- Excessive social media use
- Self-harm (Often described as a way of ‘feeling something’)
- Alcohol and drug use
- Excessive gaming (It provides a consistent, safe, unemotional world)
- Social media abuse
- Eating disorders linked to control
- Promiscuity

WHAT CAN ADULTS DO TO HELP CHILDREN DEVELOP THEIR EMOTIONAL REGULATION SKILLS?

1. Create emotionally expressive environments at home and school. These are spaces and places for kids where they feel free to say how they feel without fear of being ‘shut down’. There is a limit on behavior but there is not a limit on emotion.

2. Develop your empathy response and use it with children. Kids need to feel heard. You don’t have to fix anything, just listen to understand.

3. Create a strong sense of belonging. Ritual and routine can help here. This sense of belonging makes it safe to express emotion and learn how to regulate safely.

4. Model your own emotional regulation. Talk about emotions you are experiencing and the strategies you are using to regulate those emotions.

5. Overtly teach strategies for self-regulation:

- Self-talk
- Meditation
- Take a break
- Exercise
- Talk with a good listener
- Breathe
- **6. Talk to kids about emotional regulation and strategies when they are calm,** not in the middle of a meltdown. Mindfulness is essential.
- **7. Teach kids that positive emotions need to be regulated, not just negative ones.** When kids talk over others or act ‘over the top’ and silly because they are excited they put people off.
- **8. Try not to be dictated to by our culture’s gender bias.** Unfortunately, males and females get quite different feedback to emotions. Boys are expected to suppress their emotions much more than girls. Equally as damaging is the perception that female expressions of emotion are melodramatic and not to be taken too seriously. Let’s avoid the dismissive, ‘that’s just girls’.

FINALLY...

Remind children that crying is a valid form of emotional regulation. Remember that it’s not necessary to stop someone crying. It won’t make them feel better. Just be with it. Tears are not a sign of weakness or of lack of competence. Crying releases emotional tension and can flag distress. Just because someone is emotional does not mean that what they are saying, or thinking is not rational.

<https://www.mindfulnessmuse.com/dialectical-behavior-therapy/top-10-ways-to-regulate-emotions-part-one>

Figuring out how to talk to teenagers can be tricky. Here are 10 tips designed to transform your conversations.

Talking to teenagers about anything serious can be one of those bang-your-head-against-a-wall activities. It feels good when you stop. They are great at banter, jokes and even flirting, but trying to get to the bottom of an emotional problem can be painful...for everyone involved.

Many teens don't like 'deep' conversations, at least not with a parent or teacher. You can abandon everything you've learnt about open, honest body language. The minute you sit them down and try to engage them in face-to-face discussion, with eye contact...you're done. They are likely to shut down. So, how do you ever figure out what's on their mind?

THERE'S A TIME AND A PLACE TO TALK TO TEENAGERS

I learnt early on that if I could get teenagers busy and moving and working by my side, there was a decent chance that we could get somewhere. I'm sure many of you have noticed the same thing. Psychologists call it side-by side-listening.

I was an English teacher. That involves carrying a lot of books from bookrooms to classrooms and back again. Most of the book carrying that I had kids help me with was completely unnecessary. Some of those books travelled so far, they should have had passports. But it did the trick.

The kids felt as though they were helping me, they were moving so they didn't feel trapped, and we were side by side, so there was no intimidating eye contact. I don't feel bad about the ruse. We were going to have those talks anyway, side by side was just a better way.

Other side-by-side activities I've used are peeling potatoes, washing dishes, cleaning the car, hiking and shooting hoops. Some people advocate talking while travelling in the car and I'm sure it works for some people.

I just remember that my mum used to give me sex ed chats while we were driving, and I felt trapped. There were times I would have thrown myself out of the moving car if I thought that would stop her talking. So really you have to choose the right activity for the child.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP...

Resilient Youth Australia report that in a sample of over 91,000 Australian children, 32% of Years 7 – 8 students and 39% of Years 9 – 10 say they cannot identify an adult in their lives who listens to them. Whether these figures represent reality or perception is interesting, but ultimately irrelevant. It is their experience of the world. Maybe it is not that we don't want to listen as much as that we don't know how to get them to start talking.

It helps to have a shared interest with a child, like surfing or dance or cooking or a football team or absolutely anything. It's important because it builds a bond and because talking about the interest leads to talking about other things.

A shared interest is a touchstone and a starting point. A shared interest can also carry you through the uncommunicative teenage years and out the other side. Through those years you can retain a connection that would otherwise be hard to establish.

In building communication try to amplify the positives. Don't talk just when there are negatives to be discussed. Show genuine interest. If a child can come to you with positive things and be reinforced, there is more of a chance that they will approach you with more difficult topics. The old adage is true, take note of the little things when children are young, so that they will come to you with the big things when they are older. Because to them, they've all been big things.

10 SKILLS ADULTS NEED IN ORDER TO TALK TO TEENAGERS

1. Choose an appropriate context. It's all about the right time and the right place. If you are rushed or stressed yourself, don't even try. If it is important enough to talk about, it is important enough to create the right situation to talk. Remember, movement helps.

2. Sit with discomfort. It's not just kids who feel uncomfortable with serious conversations or conversations about feelings. Even if we feel uncomfortable, we need to be okay about feeling uncomfortable.

3. Use I statements. The reason for using I statements is that they avoid telling someone how they feel and they allow for clarification. Santa Maria College Psychologist Beth O'Regan gives this example, "I've noticed that you've stopped playing basketball and haven't been spending as much time with your friends lately, and I'm worried because that's out of character for you." State a behavior you've seen or noticed and follow up with how it makes you feel and why. That can then lead onto a question like, "Is there something going on for you right now that you'd like to talk about?"

4. Beth also says, it's important to **be genuine and authentic**. It's ok to admit that you find a particular topic difficult to talk about. Also within this realm, be aware of your language, and only use language you are comfortable with. If you try to use slang or phrases you don't normally use in an attempt to speak in the same way as the young person, they will be able to tell immediately and it may have the opposite effect of creating a barrier, rather than removing one.

5. Don't interrupt. Once you get a teenager talking, don't interrupt. Let them explain whole ideas. Sometimes they will talk themselves into an understanding of how they feel or what they need to do, just by virtue of having to articulate it. At the very least you will have a complete picture of what they are trying to communicate. **The good stuff often comes at the end.**

6. Give your teen time to think, not just speak. Be comfortable with pauses. Don't feel as though you need to fill the dead air.

7. Suspend judgment. This is hard, but how you react determines whether or not the conversation continues. You don't have to agree with what is being said, but don't shut it down verbally, with emotional responses or with body language.

8. When you get to the essence of the conversation, paraphrase or repeat in order to **clarify your understanding**. **Just because you think you understand, doesn't mean you do.** Check.

9. Ask yourself, am I listening to understand? Or am I listening to comment or fix it? It makes a big difference when we listen just to understand.

10. Finally, remember...sometimes kids don't know how they feel or why they do the things they do. They just do. They will show you how they feel through their actions. If they feel under siege, they may be aggressive or close up. If they are sad, they may show the secondary emotion of anger. If that's the case, we need to listen with our eyes and our experience and our hearts. Tread gently.