

# Understanding Emotional Regulation in Children

Expert insight: science made simple for families

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice, understand and manage feelings, body signals and behaviour. Children are not born knowing how to do this on their own. They learn it slowly through safety, connection, practice and support from trusted adults.

## Who this resource is for

Parents, carers and families who want a simple, compassionate understanding of emotional regulation, especially when supporting neurodivergent children, children with SEND, or children with SEMH needs.

## What this guide will help you understand

- What emotional regulation means in everyday family life.
- Why big feelings can lead to behaviour that looks challenging.
- How the brain and body respond to stress, overload and threat.
- How adults can co-regulate with children before expecting self-regulation.
- Practical phrases, strategies and reflection tools you can use at home.

## A gentle reminder

This guide does not replace medical, psychological or specialist advice. It is designed to make the science easier to understand and give families practical starting points.

# The Simple Science

What is happening beneath the behaviour?

## Emotional regulation is not just about behaviour

When a child is upset, overwhelmed or dysregulated, what we see on the outside is often only the surface. Crying, shouting, running away, refusing, hiding, arguing or shutting down may be signs that the child's nervous system is struggling to cope.

<b>Brain</b> The brain scans for safety and threat. When stress rises, thinking and problem-solving can become harder.	<b>Body</b> The body may speed up, tense, freeze, fidget, feel hot, feel sick, or need movement.
<b>Feelings</b> Children may not yet have the words to explain what is happening inside.	<b>Behaviour</b> Behaviour is communication. It can show us that a child needs safety, support, space or connection.

## The stress response: fight, flight, freeze or fawn

When a child feels unsafe, overloaded, rushed, embarrassed, confused or out of control, the body can move into a stress response. This is not a child being deliberately difficult. It is the nervous system trying to protect them.

Response	What it may look like
<b>Fight</b>	Arguing, shouting, hitting out, saying no, becoming controlling, or seeming angry.
<b>Flight</b>	Running away, avoiding, hiding, leaving the room, refusing to engage, or trying to escape.
<b>Freeze</b>	Going quiet, seeming blank, not answering, becoming stuck, or being unable to start.
<b>Fawn</b>	People-pleasing, saying yes when they mean no, masking distress, or trying to keep adults happy.

### Science made simple

When stress is high, the thinking brain can go offline. A child may need calm and connection before they can listen, explain, apologise or problem-solve.

# Co-Regulation First

Children borrow calm from safe adults

## What is co-regulation?

Co-regulation means an adult supports a child to feel safe, steady and understood. Over time, repeated co-regulation helps children build their own regulation skills. Self-regulation develops through practice, not pressure.

## What children often need before a conversation

- A calm adult voice and slower pace.
- Reduced demands and fewer questions.
- A safe space or lower sensory input.
- Validation of feelings before problem-solving.
- Time for the body to settle before discussing what happened.

<b>Instead of</b> “Calm down.”	<b>Try</b> “I can see this feels really big. I am here with you.”
<b>Instead of</b> “Use your words.”	<b>Try</b> “You do not have to explain yet. Point, show me, or we can wait.”
<b>Instead of</b> “Why did you do that?”	<b>Try</b> “Something felt too much. Let us work out what happened when you are ready.”
<b>Instead of</b> “Stop overreacting.”	<b>Try</b> “Your body is telling us this feels hard. Let us make it feel safer.”

### The adult nervous system matters too

Children often respond to our tone, facial expression, pace and body language before they can process our words. Regulating yourself first is not a luxury - it is part of the support.

# Common Triggers

Why some moments feel bigger for children

## Triggers are not always obvious

A trigger is anything that increases stress, uncertainty or overload. Sometimes the trigger is not the thing that happened last. It may be the build-up across the day: school demands, sensory input, hunger, tiredness, masking, social pressure or changes in routine.

Possible trigger	What may help
Transitions	Give warning, use visual prompts, offer choices, and reduce rushing where possible.
Sensory overload	Lower noise, dim bright lights, offer ear defenders, movement, deep pressure or quiet space.
Unclear expectations	Use short instructions, visuals, examples and one step at a time.
Hunger or tiredness	Offer food, drink, rest, comfort or a quieter routine before expecting learning or discussion.
Change or uncertainty	Preview what will happen, explain what is staying the same, and use a simple plan.
Shame or embarrassment	Correct privately, use gentle language, and separate the child from the behaviour.
After-school restraint collapse	Allow decompression time after school before questions, homework or demands.

## Look for patterns

Families do not need to analyse everything. A simple pattern check can help: When does it happen? What was happening before? What helped? What made it harder? What might the child have needed?

### Helpful reframe

Instead of asking “What is wrong with my child?”, try asking “What is my child's nervous system trying to tell us?”

# Regulation Tools

Simple strategies for home

## A regulation tool is not a reward

Regulation tools help the nervous system feel safer and more organised. They are not treats, bribes or rewards for good behaviour. They are supports that help children access learning, communication, connection and everyday life.

<b>Movement</b> Jumping, wall pushes, stretching, animal walks, walking outside, dancing or carrying something safe.	<b>Deep pressure</b> A weighted lap pad, blanket burrito, firm cushion squeeze, bear hug if wanted, or pushing hands together.
<b>Breathing</b> Bubble breathing, smelling a flower and blowing a candle, or breathing with a soft toy on the tummy.	<b>Sensory calm</b> Dim lights, headphones, a quiet corner, soft textures, calming music, or a lower-demand space.
<b>Connection</b> Sitting nearby, using humour gently, offering reassurance, or doing a shared calming activity.	<b>Predictability</b> Visual schedules, now-and-next boards, timers, countdowns and simple routines.

## A simple regulation menu

- Green zone / steady: practise skills when calm, not only during crisis.
- Amber zone / building stress: reduce demands, use visuals, offer movement or sensory support.
- Red zone / overwhelmed: prioritise safety, fewer words, calm presence, space and time.
- Recovery: repair gently, reconnect, reflect later, and plan one small next step.

### Important

Not every strategy works for every child. Some children need movement; others need quiet. Some like touch; others find touch overwhelming. Let the child help build their own regulation menu.

# What to Say in the Moment

Language that lowers pressure

## Use fewer words when emotions are high

During dysregulation, long explanations can feel like more demand. Short, steady phrases are often easier for children to process.

When you notice...	You could say...
The child is starting to escalate	"I can see this is getting hard. Let us pause."
The child cannot explain	"You do not need to find the words yet."
The child is refusing	"This feels too much right now. We can make the first step smaller."
The child is angry	"It is okay to feel angry. I will help keep everyone safe."
The child is hiding or shutting down	"I will stay nearby. You are not in trouble."
The child is ready to repair	"We had a hard moment. We can try again together."

## Repair after rupture

All families have hard moments. Repair teaches children that relationships can survive conflict and that mistakes can be talked about safely. Repair is not about blame; it is about reconnecting and learning.

- "That was a difficult moment for both of us."
- "I am sorry I raised my voice."
- "Next time, let us try using the quiet card earlier."
- "You are loved, even when things feel hard."

# Printable Family Reflection Page

Use this to build your own emotional regulation plan

Use this page during a calm moment. Children can talk, draw, point, write, or choose from options. You can complete it together or fill it in as an adult reflection.

## My child's regulation profile

<b>Things that help my child feel calm:</b>	
<b>Things that can make stress build:</b>	
<b>Early signs my child is becoming overwhelmed:</b>	
<b>What my child needs from adults:</b>	
<b>Words or phrases that help:</b>	
<b>Words or phrases to avoid:</b>	
<b>Helpful sensory tools or spaces:</b>	
<b>What helps after a difficult moment:</b>	

## Family phrase to remember

Connection before correction. Safety before solutions. Calm before conversation.

# When Extra Support May Be Needed

Knowing when to reach out

## Families should not have to manage everything alone

Emotional regulation can be affected by development, neurodivergence, communication differences, sensory processing, trauma, sleep, anxiety, school pressures, family stress and unmet needs. Seeking help is not a failure. It can be an important part of supporting the child and the whole family.

## Consider asking for additional support if

- Distress is frequent, intense or taking a long time to recover from.
- Your child is regularly unable to attend school, sleep, eat, communicate or join everyday routines.
- There are safety concerns for the child, siblings, parents, carers or others.
- You feel exhausted, isolated or unsure how to respond.
- School and home are seeing very different presentations and you need joined-up support.

Who may be able to help	How they may support
School SENCO or pastoral lead	Create support plans, reasonable adjustments, sensory breaks, transition support and communication strategies.
GP or health professional	Explore sleep, anxiety, physical health, development or referral pathways.
Educational psychologist	Assess learning, emotional needs, regulation barriers and support recommendations.
Occupational therapist	Support sensory processing, daily routines, motor needs and regulation strategies.
Family support or local SEND services	Provide practical guidance, signposting and support with meetings or next steps.

### Final thought

Emotional regulation is a skill built through repeated experiences of safety, understanding and support. You do not need to get it right every time. Small, consistent changes can make a meaningful difference.