

## Expert Insight

# Understanding Emotional Regulation in Children

Science made simple for schools, teachers and teaching assistants

### Purpose of this resource

This guide helps school staff understand emotional regulation in a practical, compassionate way. It explains what happens in the brain and body, why some children find regulation harder, and what adults can do before, during and after moments of distress.

**For: teachers, teaching assistants, SENCOs, pastoral staff and school leaders**

### What you will find inside

<b>1. The science made simple</b>	A clear explanation of regulation, stress responses and the developing brain.
<b>2. What it can look like in school</b>	How dysregulation may present in the classroom, playground and transitions.
<b>3. Practical responses</b>	Simple co-regulation strategies staff can use immediately.
<b>4. Reflection tools</b>	Checklists, scripts and planning pages for consistent support.

# 1. Emotional regulation: the simple definition

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice, manage and recover from feelings, stress and sensory input. For children, this skill is still developing. Some children need much more adult support because their nervous system, sensory processing, communication, attention or previous experiences can make everyday school demands feel harder.

## Key message for school staff

A child who is dysregulated is not always choosing to be difficult. They may be showing us that their brain and body are struggling to cope in that moment.

## Regulation is not the same as compliance

- Compliance asks: “How do we get the child to do what we need?”
- Regulation asks: “What does the child need so they can access learning safely?”
- When regulation improves, learning, communication and cooperation usually become easier.

## A simple school-friendly model

**Green: ready to learn**  
Child can listen, think, play, communicate and try.

**Amber: becoming overwhelmed**  
Child may fidget, withdraw, argue, avoid, become silly, rush or struggle to process language.

**Red: survival mode**  
Child may run, freeze, cry, shout, hide, refuse, lash out or shut down.

## 2. What happens in the brain and body?

When a child feels safe enough, the thinking part of the brain can support problem solving, memory, language and flexible thinking. When the brain senses threat or overload, the body can move into a stress response. This can happen even when adults do not see the situation as dangerous.

### The stress response in plain English

Response	What adults may see	Helpful adult response
<b>Fight</b>	Arguing, shouting, pushing away, ripping work, blaming others	Reduce language, lower demands, create space, stay calm and keep safety boundaries.
<b>Flight</b>	Leaving the room, hiding, avoiding tasks, asking to go to the toilet repeatedly	Use agreed safe places, check sensory/environmental triggers, offer a short regulated break.
<b>Freeze</b>	Silent, still, blank expression, unable to answer, stuck at the desk	Give time, use gentle prompts, offer choices visually, avoid public pressure.
<b>Fawn / please</b>	Saying yes but not coping, masking distress, copying others, becoming overly apologetic	Check understanding privately, reassure, reduce pressure and offer a safe way to say "I need help".

#### Why language can stop working

In high stress, children may find it harder to process spoken instructions. Long explanations, public questions or repeated demands can increase overload. Short, calm, concrete communication is usually more effective.

### 3. Why some children need more support with regulation

Children develop regulation through relationships, repeated experiences and adult support. Some children may need extra help because regulation is affected by many factors, not just behaviour.

Possible factor	How it may affect the school day
<b>Sensory processing differences</b>	Noise, lighting, smells, touch, movement or busy spaces may quickly increase stress.
<b>Neurodivergence</b>	Autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other differences can affect processing, attention, communication, transitions and emotional intensity.
<b>Speech, language and communication needs</b>	A child may not understand, remember or express what they need in the moment.
<b>SEMH needs or trauma</b>	The nervous system may be more alert to threat, change, rejection or unpredictability.
<b>Sleep, hunger, pain or health needs</b>	Physical needs can reduce tolerance, attention and emotional capacity.
<b>Executive functioning differences</b>	Planning, starting, shifting attention, waiting and organising can require more support.

#### Important reminder

A child may be able to regulate in one lesson and struggle in another. This does not mean they are being inconsistent on purpose. Context matters: relationship, task demand, sensory load, peer dynamics, time of day and previous stress all make a difference.

## 4. What dysregulation can look like in school

Dysregulation does not always look like a “meltdown”. Many children show quieter signs of distress that can be missed, especially children who mask, internalise or try hard to please adults.

In the classroom	During transitions	Social times
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoiding work</li><li>• Staring at the page</li><li>• Rushing or making repeated mistakes</li><li>• Interrupting or calling out</li><li>• Becoming silly or argumentative</li><li>• Asking repeated questions</li><li>• Tearing paper or refusing to write</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Refusing to move</li><li>• Taking a long time to pack away</li><li>• Running ahead or hanging back</li><li>• Becoming anxious about what is next</li><li>• Needing repeated reassurance</li><li>• Difficulty moving from preferred to non-preferred tasks</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hiding or staying close to adults</li><li>• Rough play or conflict</li><li>• Misreading social cues</li><li>• Becoming overwhelmed by noise</li><li>• Struggling to join in</li><li>• Feeling rejected or left out</li></ul>

### Look for the early signs

- Change in facial expression, posture, voice, pace or energy
- More movement, less movement or seeking to leave
- Sudden tiredness, headaches, stomach aches or repeated requests to go out
- Loss of skills the child can usually manage, such as writing, listening or turn-taking

## 5. Co-regulation: what adults do first

Co-regulation means an adult lends their calm, structure and safety to the child. Children learn self-regulation through repeated experiences of being supported by regulated adults.

### The adult's nervous system matters

A calm tone, steady body language and predictable response can reduce threat. A rushed, loud or public response can unintentionally increase stress.

### The 5-step school response

Step	Adult action	Example
<b>1. Notice</b>	Spot early signs before behaviour escalates.	"I can see this is getting tricky."
<b>2. Reduce</b>	Lower sensory, social or task demand where possible.	Move closer, lower voice, reduce instructions.
<b>3. Connect</b>	Use warmth before correction.	"I am here. You are not in trouble."
<b>4. Support</b>	Offer a simple next step or choice.	"Do you want to start with question 1 or use the first sentence prompt?"
<b>5. Repair</b>	Afterwards, reflect and plan without shame.	"What helped? What should we try next time?"

## 6. What to say in the moment

In moments of high stress, children usually need fewer words, more clarity and less public attention. The scripts below are designed to be calm, short and practical.

Instead of...	Try...
"Calm down."	"Let's take a pause. I am here."
"Why are you doing this?"	"Something feels hard. We can work it out."
"You know how to do this."	"Let's make the first step smaller."
"Stop making a fuss."	"Your body looks overwhelmed. Let's reduce the pressure."
"You need to listen."	"I'll say one thing at a time."
"You're choosing not to."	"I can see you're stuck. Let's use the plan."

### Helpful communication principles

- Use the child's name gently, not repeatedly.
- Give one instruction at a time.
- Avoid public correction where possible.
- Use visual prompts, gestures or written steps.
- Offer two acceptable choices rather than open-ended questions.
- Pause and allow processing time.

## 7. Regulation-friendly classroom strategies

Strategy	What it supports	Practical example
Predictable routines	Safety and reduced uncertainty	Visual timetable, now/next board, clear start and finish points.
Movement breaks	Energy regulation and attention	Errand jobs, wall pushes, stretching, sensory path, chair push-ups.
Reduced sensory load	Overwhelm prevention	Seat away from noise, ear defenders, calmer lighting where possible.
Task chunking	Executive functioning and confidence	Break work into small steps with checkboxes.
Choice within structure	Autonomy without losing boundaries	"Use pencil or laptop?" "Start independently or with me?"
Safe exit plan	De-escalation and dignity	Agreed card or signal to access a calm space.
Positive noticing	Connection and motivation	Notice effort, recovery, asking for help and trying again.

### Think prevention, not just response

The best regulation support often happens before the child reaches crisis point: predictable routines, sensory adjustments, clear expectations and trusted relationships.

## 8. After an incident: repair and reflection

Reflection is most effective once the child has returned to a calmer state. This may be later the same day or the next day. The aim is not to shame the child; it is to understand what happened and build a better plan.

### Restorative questions for children

- What was happening before things became too much?
- What did your body feel like?
- What helped a little?
- What did not help?
- What could adults do earlier next time?
- What could you try next time, with support?

### Questions for staff reflection

<b>Trigger or build-up</b>	What sensory, social, emotional or task demands were present?
<b>Early signs</b>	What did we notice before escalation?
<b>Adult response</b>	What helped? What may have increased pressure?
<b>Environment</b>	Could seating, noise, transition timing or task format be adjusted?
<b>Communication</b>	Were instructions clear, short and accessible?
<b>Plan</b>	What will we try consistently for the next two weeks?

## 9. Quick regulation plan for school staff

Use this page to agree a simple, consistent plan for a child who finds regulation difficult. Keep it practical and share it with relevant staff.

<b>Child's strengths and interests</b>	
<b>Early signs we may notice</b>	
<b>Common triggers or pressure points</b>	
<b>Helpful adult language</b>	
<b>Regulation tools or sensory supports</b>	
<b>Safe space or exit plan</b>	
<b>What to avoid when the child is dysregulated</b>	
<b>Review date and staff involved</b>	

## 10. Whole-class regulation checklist

These approaches can benefit many learners and reduce the need for individual children to stand out.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Visual timetable is displayed and referred to during the day.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Transitions are explained before they happen.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Instructions are short, clear and supported visually where possible.
<input type="checkbox"/>	There are planned movement opportunities.
<input type="checkbox"/>	The classroom has a calm-down option or low-demand space.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Adults use consistent language for emotions and regulation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Children are taught what different feelings may feel like in the body.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staff notice effort, recovery and help-seeking, not only task completion.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Reasonable adjustments are considered before sanctions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Families are included as partners in understanding what helps.

## Final thoughts

Emotional regulation is not a quick fix or a one-off intervention. It grows through safety, relationship, practice and consistency. When adults understand the science behind behaviour, they can respond with more curiosity and less blame.

### A simple phrase to remember

Regulate first. Relate second. Reflect and problem-solve when the child is ready.

### Useful next steps for schools

- Audit common transition points and sensory pressure points across the school day.
- Agree shared regulation language across classrooms.
- Create individual regulation plans for children who need additional support.
- Include teaching assistants in planning and reviews, as they often notice early signs first.
- Review behaviour policies through a neurodiversity-informed and trauma-aware lens.

### NeuroEmpower CIC

[www.neuroempower.org](http://www.neuroempower.org) | [www.neuroempower.co.uk](http://www.neuroempower.co.uk) | [info@neuroempower](mailto:info@neuroempower)