Helping Children Learn to Regulate Their Emotions

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Billy's Little League baseball team had won four games and lost four. On this particular day they were playing the best team in the league. It was a close game, but Billy's team was consistently ahead. The team was ecstatic. But suddenly in the last 10 minutes, the game turned and the other team was ahead by three points. The pressure was on! The pitcher for Billy's team became so anxious that he threw the ball to first rather than to home base, and the other team was able to get another player home. Finally, the other team struck out and Billy went up to bat, trembling. When he struck out, he was so mad that he threw his helmet onto the field. His father commented, "What drama! Can't he learn to control himself?" A second boy, Eric, struck out and stoically left the field, showing no emotional reaction. Jack and Ian, on the other hand, burst into tears as they realized they were going to lose. One parent yelled to them, "10-year-old boys are too old to cry! Don't be babies." Another parent advised, "Don't cry — get mad!" As the team left the field in despair one boy said, "I'm going to break their pitcher's leg." Later Billy explained to his father, "They were just lucky."

What is emotional regulation?

Emotions are responses to stimuli or situations that affect a person strongly. Emotional responses occur on three levels. The first — and most basic — level involves *neurophysiological and biochemical* reactions to stimuli, including all the bodily processes regulated by the autonomic nervous system: heart rate, blood flow, respiration, hormonal secretions (epinephrine, cortisol) and neural responses (EEG). For example, a person who is angry feels her heart race and her face redden. The second level of emotional response is *behavioral*, where emotions are expressed in a person's actions. This level includes facial expressions and such behaviors as crying, sullen gazes, withdrawal from interactions with others, and delayed responses. The third level is *cognitive* and involves language (whether spoken, written, or thought) by which a person labels her feelings as in, "I feel frustrated."

In the scenario described above, the emotional responses of the group of similar-aged boys reveal different levels of emotional responses to the same situation. Billy's trembling was a neurophysiological expression of emotion. Jack and Ian expressed their emotions through their behavior (tears), as did Billy when he hurled his helmet in anger. Eric's leaving the field was an example of withdrawal, another behavioral expression of emotion. Still another boy expressed his feelings through words, revealing his cognitive response to the event. Children differ strikingly in their emotional responses — in the frequency and range of their emotions as well as the ways they express emotion. They also vary widely in the subtlety of their understanding of emotions (both their own and others), in the degree of pleasure they show when they share positive emotions, and in their ability to regulate or control their negative responses to frustrating situations.

Emotional regulation refers to a person's ability to provide adequate control over his or her

emotional responses (neurophysiological and biochemical, behavioral and cognitive) to arousing situations. The term *emotional dysregulation* refers to a person whose emotional responses are chronically out of control, like the child with conduct problems whose impulsive anger and aggression are so excessive that he cannot make and maintain friendships, or the child whose withdrawal from emotionally challenging situations becomes so habitual that she cannot enter into any new activities.

How do children learn emotional regulation?

Just like walking, talking and toilet training, the regulation of emotional responses is a developmental achievement which is not present at birth — i.e., it must be learned. The initial regulation must be provided by the environment. Picture the young infant who has a wet diaper or is hungry or is bored. She expresses her distress in the only way she can — through crying. The infant requires help from the environment to modulate her physiological states and to reduce her internal tension. The parent plays an integral role in helping the infant regulate her emotional arousal: that is, the parent tries to understand the meaning of the baby's cries and then takes the necessary action to calm her. As we all know, some babies are more easily calmed and others are more difficult. This fact suggests that there are individual differences in infants' ability to acquire self-regulation.

The transition period from infancy to toddlerhood is accompanied by maturation in the child's emotional regulatory system. During this developmental period, the burden of emotional regulation begins to shift from parent to child. One of the most important developmental achievements associated with the emergence of emotional regulation is the child's acquisition of language and communication skills. As children develop language skills they become increasingly able to label their emotions, their thoughts, and their intentions. And as children become more able to communicate their complex needs and feelings, they can more effectively regulate their emotional responses. In part, this means letting their parents know what they need in order to be able to calm themselves.

In the transition from the preschool to the school age years, children begin to assume greater responsibility for their own emotional functioning, so that less parental regulation is required. Nevertheless, parents do continue to have a major role in their children's emotional regulation. During the school age years, emotional regulation changes to a more complex and abstract process; whereas in infancy it was primarily *reflexive*, guided by physiological discomfort, now it becomes more *reflective*, guided by the child's sense of self and the environment. Instead of the angry or frustrated child hitting someone or exploding in a tantrum, now she will argue with parent. Instead of expressing his impatience by wailing, he will be able to wait. Instead of expressing her excitement by running around in circles, she will be able to talk about how excited she is. The extreme emotional responses of anger, distress, and excitement have been dampened to some extent by this age. Moreover, as children develop their own capacity for emotional regulation, the internal or subjective aspects of emotion become separate from the external expression of emotion (or affect). Thus we see the school-aged child who can be internally distressed by an event but outwardly express no sign of emotion. During adolescence, there is an upheaval of the child's emotional systems as hormones enter into the picture, challenging the emotional regulation which the adolescent has learned over the years. To the parents of an adolescent, it may seem as if their child has regressed to the emotional regulatory stage of a preschooler!

What determines how quickly children learn emotional regulation?

Just as there is a wide variation in the point at which children start to walk or talk or learn to use the toilet, some children's neuroregulatory or self-regulatory systems develop at a slower rate than other children's. We know little as yet about the factors that contribute to these differences in timing. However, research does suggest that there are at least three processes underlying children's growing ability to regulate their emotions:

(1) Maturation of the child's neurological inhibitory system. The growth and development of the child's

nervous system provides the necessary neurological "hardware" required for the eventual control of emotions.

(2) The child's temperament and developmental status. Some children are more vulnerable to emotional dysregulation due to learning difficulties, language delays, attentional deficits or temperament.

(3) Parental socialization and environmental support. Differences in the ways that families talk about feelings (their own and others') are related to later differences in the ways children express their feelings and their growing ability or inability to regulate their emotions. Children who experience chronic stress in their environment, or whose daily lives lack predictability and stability, have more difficulties with emotional regulation.

What can parents do?

While we cannot change the first two factors described above — a child's neurological system or temperament and developmental status — it is important for parents to understand they *can* have a major impact on children's ability to regulate their emotions through the third factor, socialization and environmental support. The following guidelines explain some ways in which parents can help their children learn emotional regulation.

1. Provide as much stability and consistency as possible.
Parents can support the development of emotional regulation by providing environmental stability and consistency in the home. For example, consistent limit-setting, clear household rules and predictable routines help children know what to expect. This in turn helps them feel calmer and more secure. If children perceive their home environment as a stable, secure place, they will develop the emotional resources to deal with the less predictable world outside the home.

2. Accept your child's emotions and emotional responses.
It is important to remember that when children respond with emotional outbursts, these behaviors are not intentional nor are they a deliberate attempt to make parenting difficult for you. Accept the fact that it is normal for children at times to sulk, to respond by yelling, cursing or breaking something, or to want to withdraw and be left alone. While these emotional responses can be draining and distressing for parents, your patience and acceptance are crucial factors in your child learning to cope with his or her emotional responses. By "tuning in" and being understanding of your child's emotional states you can help your child tolerate increasing amounts of emotional tension.

3. Talk about your own feelings.
One way to help children learn to express feelings and to regulate their own emotional responses is for parents to use the language of feelings with their children. For example, in the example at the start of this article, the father might have said something like this to his son:

"I felt really frustrated to see your team lose after doing so well throughout the whole game. I feel sad that you lost. But the important thing is you played a really good game. You guys were doing your best and you were good team members — you all really worked together. I was proud of you. Next time maybe you'll win!"

Parents who frequently use the language of emotions to express their own emotional states and to interpret others' (nonverbal) emotional expressions — who talk about feelings so that their children learn to identify emotions accurately and become accustomed to talking about feelings — are providing their children with a powerful mechanism for emotional regulation. Their children will be less likely to resort to behavioral expressions of negative emotions. Research has suggested that children who learn to use emotional language have more control over their nonverbal emotional expressions, which in turn enhances the regulation of emotions themselves. By using the language of feelings, parents not only transfer a useful coping skill to their children, but also show them how they cope with particular feelings. In contrast, parents who use language to intellectualize their emotions or to "talk themselves out of" a particular emotion will encourage the use of an over-controlled coping style — their children will learn to "bottle up" their emotions rather than to regulate them.

4. Encourage children to talk about feelings — Avoid direc-

tives about feelings.
The fact that children do not talk much about their emotions may be due not just to inexperience but to having experienced their parents' disapproval of the expression of emotion or of a certain kind of emotion. We saw this in the example above when the father told the children not to cry but to get mad instead. When parents give directives about emotional expression, children may find it difficult to stay in touch with their true feelings and therefore have problems regulating their emotions. Avoid statements such as, "Don't be sad," or "You shouldn't be angry about that." Instead, label the child's feelings accurately and encourage the child to talk about the emotion: "I see you are sad about that: Can you tell me what happened?" As the child tells you about her experience, listen carefully without judging or giving advice. Sometimes it can be helpful to share a past experience that matches the child's. For example, " I remember a time when there were three men on base, two out and I was up to bat. If I had brought one man home, we would have won the game. I struck out. I felt terrible."

It is important for children to understand that, just as one person likes broccoli and another doesn't, people may have different feelings about the same event. It is also important for them to understand that a person may even have more than one feeling at the same time. The crucial lesson to teach children is that there is nothing wrong with any feeling; all feelings are normal and natural. Some feelings are comfortable and nice inside while others hurt, but they are all real and important. We are trying to teach them to control their behavior, not their feelings. Be sure they understand that while it is not always okay to act on our feelings, it is always okay to talk about them.

The ability to talk about emotions not only helps children regulate their negative emotions but also gives them far greater power to express affection and concern, to ask for and receive affection, and to achieve new intimacy in their relationships.

5. Model emotional regulation.
How do you handle your own emotions? Do you fly off the handle easily? or withdraw in sullen protest? Remember that along with emotional tension or overstimulation, another factor contributing to children's outbursts is modeling — i.e., exposure to adults who themselves display outbursts of anger or frustration. As they try to mange their everyday frustrations, your children are likely to imitate your example. You can help your child by verbalizing your emotions and your strategies for coping. For example, if you are getting frustrated with that lawnmower you are trying to repair, instead of exploding in a torrent of swear words, you might say out loud, "I'd better stop and calm down and relax a little before I continue. I'm so frustrated that I seem to be making things worse. Maybe if I get away from it for a while I'll figure out what it is I need to do." Or if you are disappointed and angry because your boss let your coworker go the conference but wouldn't let you go, you might say, "I was disappointed she didn't pick me to go. It kind of made me feel mad because I wanted to go so bad. But maybe next time it will be my turn — I guess there isn't enough money for two to go." As always, it is important to model the kind of behavior you expect your child to exhibit. If you want your child to manage his emotions, it is important that he see you doing the same and that he see how you do it.

It is important to stay calm yourself when your child's emotional responses are escalating. Often when a child is frustrated or shows increasing tension and anger about something, a parent responds with additional anxiety or frustration. Instead, the parent should try to offer calm and soothing words of advice, perhaps even cuddle the child or stroke his arm or back. Such support often can help children calm themselves enough to able to state how they are feeling.

6. Teach children positive self-talk about the event.
When children experience a negative emotion such as anger, frustration, fear, or discouragement, often there are underlying thoughts which accompany the emotion and which reinforce or intensify it and may even be causing it. These thoughts are sometimes referred to as "self-talk," although children will sometimes express them aloud. For example, a child who is feeling discouraged may say to you or to himself, "I'm just a

failure," " I can't do anything right," " I might as well give up."

In the example outlined at the start of this article, Billy and Eric react differently because they are telling themselves different things about the incident. If we asked Billy why he got angry, he might have said, " The pitcher didn't know how to throw a good ball." If we asked Eric why he didn't get angry, he might have said, "I'm no good at baseball — I can't hit the ball anyway." While Billy responds by blaming the other guy and Eric responds with negative self-talk, in both cases they were caught up in negative behavioral responses and negative emotions that might have been averted if they had said something different to themselves such as, "I did my best, I struck out but next time I'll do better" or "I can do it, it just takes practice, everyone strikes out sometimes."

Research indicates that children whose "self-talk" is negative get angry more easily than children whose self-talk is positive. Children can be taught to identify negative self-talk and to substitute positive self-talk. Teach your children how to counterbalance their inevitable frustrations and insults by saying quietly to themselves thoughts which calm them down, thoughts which help them control themselves, thoughts which put the situation in perspective. For example, when a child is teased by another child, she can stay calm by thinking to herself, "I can handle it, I will just ignore him. It is not worth getting upset about. I can stay calm, I am strong." In the baseball illustration above, the parent might prompt his child to begin thinking this way by saying, "Tell yourself, 'I played the game well, maybe next time our team will win,' or, 'We played a great game, someone has to lose, we are good sports.' " In this way children learn to regulate their cognitive responses, which in turn will affect their behavioral and physiological responses.

Examples of positive self-talk:
"Take three breaths."
"Think happy."
"I'm not going to let it get to me."
"I am not going to blow my cool."
"Everyone gets teased at times."
"Everyone has parents who get mad at them sometimes."
"I can handle this."
"I can calm down."
"I have other friends who like me."
"He didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident."
"Everyone makes mistakes. No one is that perfect. I'll do better next time."
"With more practice, I'll get it."
"She's just in a bad mood today. She'll be better later."
"I'll calm down and use my brave talk."
"My friends still like me even if I make mistakes in baseball."
"I'll feel happier in a little while."

7. Identify typical situations which result in emotional explosions and use them as springboards to teach problem-solving.

When children resort to emotional outbursts, it is often because they do not have more effective ways of expressing their needs. Instead of reacting impulsively out of anger, they need to learn appropriate strategies for getting what they want. They can be taught to think through various ways of responding to a situation and the consequences of those responses. These are the fundamentals of problem-solving.

The basic idea is to teach your child to generate several possible solutions to a problem. For example, if your son has an ongoing problem of getting angry with his sister when she gets into his things, you could role play the situation with your son. Pick a time when your child is relaxed and ask something like: "Suppose your sister has just taken off with your brand new bike and you and your friend had just arranged to go riding together. You find yourself thinking to yourself, 'I am going to really get her for this.' What could you tell yourself to help yourself calm down?" When he has an idea, be encouraging and ask for another. "That's a good idea. You're right, she probably didn't do it on purpose, but she should have asked you first. How can we make sure she asks you first in the future? Now let's say you've calmed yourself down. What do you think you could do to solve this problem?" Once your child has come up with a solution, prompt him to come up with other solutions. When you are convinced that he has come up with as many solutions as he can think of, then you can help by offering other possible

solutions. Next, ask him to think about the consequences of each solutions. For example, you can help him to understand that if he hits his sister in order to get the bike, he might get himself in worse trouble — and he might not end up with the bike. Finally, reinforce his thinking and problem-solving efforts with praise.

Helping children practice how to handle hypothetical situations which normally cause them to get angry helps children learn to control their anger in the future. Once they learn to anticipate such situations and have some strategies for dealing with them, they can take them in stride instead of responding impulsively. Here are some situations which typically provoke emotional outbursts:

- scolding from a teacher or parent
- being teased by another child
- being rejected by group of children
- being prohibited from doing something by a parent
- losing at a game
- not being invited to a birthday party
- having to do homework before you can play with your friend

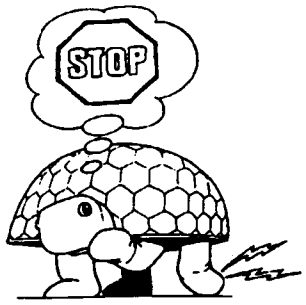
Another strategy to teach problem-solving is to review a problem situation that has recently occurred, label the emotions involved, and go over how your child might have handled the situation differently. This will be a very worthwhile discussion as long as you do not blame or criticize. Instead, the focus should be on helping your child identify what she felt in the situation and think of effective ways to manage her feelings and to solve the problem should it occur again.

Ask your child to role-play responses to these situations. Break the problem-solving process into these five steps:

1. **Define:** What is the problem and how am I feeling in this situation?
2. **Brainstorm solutions:** What could I do about it (no matter how far-fetched)?
3. **Evaluate possible solutions:** What would happen if I did this?
4. **Implement:** Am I doing what I decided to do?
5. **Evaluate results:** How did it turn out?

8. Teach the "Turtle Technique."

Teaching children to use positive self-talk and problem-solving strategies provides them with means of emotional regulation on the cognitive level. But it is sometimes necessary to help children deal with the neurophysiological/biochemical aspects of emotional arousal. For example, some children — or all children in some situations — may become so agitated with a racing heart and rapid breathing that they have no control over their self-talk and cannot do the necessary problem-solving; their physiological arousal produces cognitive disorganization. While teaching your child positive self-talk will alleviate some this overarousal, the child may need additional suggestions for how to calm down first. Researchers have found that the "turtle technique" is an effective way for children to calm down and a good first step before engaging in problem-solving.



First the child is asked to imagine she has a shell, like a turtle, that she can retreat into. She is asked to go into her shell, take three deep breaths, and say to herself, "Stop, take a deep breath, Calm down." As the child is taking these slow deep breaths, she is asked to focus on her breathing and to push the air into her arms and legs so she can relax her muscles. Sometimes we ask children to picture a particularly relaxing scene while they are in their shell. As the child continues this slow breathing she is coached to say to herself, "I can calm down. I can do it. I can control it. I can stay out of fights." She is encouraged to stay in her shell until she feels calm enough come out and try again.

Model this "turtle technique" yourself for your children. For example, say you and your children have been waiting in line in your car for someone to move out of their parking spot. Suddenly, someone else dives into the spot ahead of you. You say, "I am so mad at him for taking my parking spot! I was waiting first! Oh well, better go into my shell for a while and calm down. Guess I better use

my turtle power and take some deep breaths. . . Well, I feel better. I better think of another plan. Let's start looking for parking again."

9. Help children be aware of the stages in the build up of tension.

The first "early warning" stage of anger or negative emotion is familiar to every parent. The child grumbles, looks grouchy, sulks around the house. In the second stage the child becomes increasingly tense, restless, and moody; no matter what you suggest, nothing seems to satisfy or interest him. An explosive outburst may occur at the slightest provocation. The child may shout, curse, or even break something. He usually resists parental efforts at control at this outburst stage and may increase his opposition to anything the parent says. In the third stage, after the tantrum subsides, depression replaces aggression; it is the "leave me alone" stage. The child is sad or placid and does not want to interact with his parents. In the final fourth stage the child is ready to resume normal activities and may act as if nothing had happened.

The point for parents to intervene with suggestions of "turtle technique" or calming self-talk is in the first stage. Often in this stage children do not perceive they are becoming angry or frustrated and therefore will not communicate these feelings until they emerge in a full-blown tantrum. Therefore it is helpful in this early warning stage to encourage children to talk about feelings and to express their frustrations in socially acceptable ways. You might say, "Something seems to be bothering you, can I help in any way?" If your child has difficulty expressing herself, you might try to put into words what you suspect the child is thinking and feeling. Parental understanding and concern at this stage can go along way toward reducing build up of negative feelings.

Another possible time to intervene is in the fourth stage, after the incident is over. At this point, the parent can lead the child through problem-solving. Discussing the event helps promote better understanding in the child of why it happened and how he might handle it differently next time. The discussion should include how you and the child each felt about the episode, the causes and early warning signals, alternative ways to solve the problem in the future.

10. Use Time Out for inappropriate emotional angry outbursts.

Research has shown that Time Out is an effective method for discouraging children's inappropriate behavior. When a child who has hit another child or has been destructive is sent to a Time Out spot, he is deprived of adult attention for the aggressive behaviors. Children hunger for attention — even negative attention is preferable to none at all, and will reinforce the behavior. Thus yelling at the child for his misbehavior or giving in to the child's emotional outbursts actually increases the likelihood they will continue in the future. However, if there is no payoff for the misbehavior and if the parent withdraws her attention, the aggressive behaviors will subside — especially if you are teaching alternative responses which you reward with your approval.

First, explain to your children that aggressive behaviors such as hitting others, being verbally abusive and breaking objects will result in Time Out. For example, parents might introduce a program as follows:

"Lee, I'm so proud of you for getting ready so quickly in the morning. You jump right out of bed and get dressed when I call you. Now, I want to help you be more successful controlling your anger. It is normal to get angry, but we can't allow you to hurt others so we are going to help you learn to control your anger by putting you in Time Out every time you hit someone. You will have to go to Time Out in the chair in the corner of the room for five minutes. And you will have to be quiet for at least 2 minutes before you can get off the chair. You can help yourself get calm in Time Out by using your "turtle technique." In addition, we also are going to keep track on this chart of all the times you do stay calm in frustrating situations and talk about your feelings in an acceptable way. Then you can turn in these points on your chart for something you want."

When sending a child to Time Out for hurting someone be sure you are matter-of-fact when enforcing the rule (show no sympathy or anger).

11. Appropriate expression of

negative feelings.
As mentioned earlier, children need to know that all feelings are okay — anger, anxiety, sadness and other negative feelings are unavoidable and they are normal — but that there are different ways of expressing those feelings, and that they have a choice in how they express them. Children should be taught to put their negative feelings into words in ways that are assertive but not hostile. We can help them learn the difference between sticking up for their rights and attempting to hurt someone else, and we can praise them when they express difficult emotions in appropriate ways.

12. Praise children's efforts to regulate their emotions.
Be sure to praise children for handling their frustration without losing control of their anger. "I am really pleased that you worked so hard even though you were losing." Research has shown that aggressive and impulsive children receive more critical feedback, negative commands and less praise than other children — even when they are behaving appropriately. In essence, they train their parents not to praise or reinforce them for their positive behaviors because their emotional responses are so exhausting to deal with. However, they need positive feedback even more than normal children, for when they are praised, they are likely not to notice or process it. This means you will have to work extra hard to find all the positive behaviors you can to reinforce.

It is particularly important to try to praise behaviors involving self-control and persistence with difficult tasks, appropriate expression of feelings (be they positive or negative) and control of their emotional outbursts in frustrating or disappointing situations. Reinforce any calm, purposeful activities following a disappointment or frustrating event. For instance, you might say, "That was great. You calmed yourself down," or, "That was cool. You were patient and kept trying even though you were getting frustrated with that difficult math assignment." You can also teach them to reinforce themselves. Teach them to praise themselves out loud through positive self-talk such as, "I did a good job," or, "I stayed really calm, I am strong inside me. I was patient with myself and it paid off in the end."

Through your praise, you will help your child change his or her self-image to that of a person who is able to handle emotions. It's not necessary to wait until your child has become fully capable of emotional regulation. By using the language of becoming to express your confidence in the child's future success at this aspect of development — "You are becoming a person who can really control your anger well. You are very strong inside." — you can help make it a reality.

What Can Parents Do?

1. Provide as much stability and consistency as possible.
2. Accept you child's emotions and emotional responses.
3. Talk about your own feelings.
4. Encourage children to talk about feelings — Avoid directives about feelings.
5. Model emotional regulation.
6. Teach children positive self-talk about the event.
7. Identify typical situations which result in emotional explosions and use them as springboards to teach problem-solving.
8. Teach the "Turtle Technique."
9. Help children be aware of the stages in the build up of tension.
10. Use Time Out for inappropriate emotional angry outbursts.
11. Appropriate expression of negative feelings.
12. Praise children's efforts to regulate their emotions.