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Emotional regulation

Supporting students' diverse needs

February 2025

The support teachers provide is crucial to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in learning in safe, supportive and well-managed learning environments. Students may require varying supports depending on their strengths and needs. This practice guide is part of a suite of resources developed in partnership with MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators to help teachers refine or refresh their understanding and practice of supporting students with diverse needs.

Not all students who require additional support will have a diagnosis of disability or a health condition, and some students may have a combination of needs. Teachers and school leaders must reasonably support all students to access and participate in education. This may require making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, teaching or the curriculum in collaboration with students and parents/primary caregivers, specialist and support staff, and medical and allied health professionals.[1]

This practice guide will help you support students to understand, manage and safely express their emotions so they can successfully engage in their learning and maintain positive connections with peers and adults. It has been designed to complement, not replace, existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

Understanding emotional regulation

Students and teachers will experience many emotions in the classroom, from joy and intense interest, through to calmness and boredom, anxiety and anger. Feeling these emotions is natural; however, some students will need support in expressing their emotions safely and in regulating the actions flowing from these emotions.

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1   Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration, 2020; Disability Discrimination Act 1992, 2015; 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2021.

Emotional regulation is the ability to recognise and understand our own emotions and use a range of strategies to manage them. We can all find it hard to regulate our emotions sometimes. Emotional regulation generally develops as students get older and their executive functions emerge. For some students, these functions develop slowly or differently for a range of reasons, including physical and psychological factors or adverse childhood experiences. Emotional regulation affects relationships, interpersonal interactions and life satisfaction. Ensuring students are supported to recognise and regulate their emotions and, if they are able to, choose appropriate behaviour for the time, place or context is important for developing and maintaining good mental health,[2] and for successful engagement in learning.

When students are supported to regulate their emotions effectively, they may be more able to:

- identify and name their emotions and explain why they are feeling a certain way

- direct and maintain their focus

- communicate effectively

- solve problems

- interact socially and develop relationships through sharing and turn-taking

- reduce unhealthy or impulsive behaviours

- behave in ways that support their educational success

- calm themselves if they feel overly excited, anxious or angry

- plan to use strategies to reduce stress

- use self-talk such as reminders to calm by breathing deeply

- recognise needs, such as extra support or a break

- self-evaluate their response to a stressful situation.[3]

When students are experiencing strong emotions and difficulty regulating their emotions, their capacity to process information and articulate thoughts may be impacted and they may be incapable of responding to verbal or non-verbal directions in the moment. As a result, students may have highly variable and unpredictable ways of expressing their emotions. Feelings of embarrassment or shame, or high stress levels may lead to students expressing their emotions in a way that's not safe.

Some common behaviours and consequences associated with students experiencing difficulties regulating their emotions are:

- impulsivity

- frequent mood swings

- a persistent negative mood

- difficulty returning to a calm state

- experiencing intense emotions, which can lead to outbursts of frustration or anger

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2   Macklem, 2007.
3   Schlesier et al., 2019.

- avoidance, withdrawal and isolation

- self-injurious and risky behaviours

- difficulty expressing emotions in a safe way

- responding in ways that seem disproportionate to the situation

- difficulty connecting with peers to develop and maintain relationships.

Co-regulation is a process where a more regulated individual, such as a teacher, supports and helps students manage their emotions and behaviour responses. Through calm guidance and emotional presence, the teacher provides students with cues and strategies to regain self-control and emotional balance. Teachers play a crucial role in supporting students' development of emotional regulation through modelling calm, consistent and well-managed behaviour.

The General Capability: Personal and Social capability in the Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0) includes a range of capabilities students should develop that relate to and support their emotional regulation.

Practices to support emotional regulation

This guide outlines the following practices to support students' emotional regulation:

- Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs.
- Establish and maintain a calm and predictable learning environment.
- Explicitly teach and model how to recognise, understand and manage emotions.
- Make adjustments to support students' emotional regulation.

It is also important to consider how you collaborate with students' support networks and plan to support students' diverse needs, including students' communication needs, physical needs, sensory differences and social interactions.

Support for students' emotional needs is strengthened when:

- positive, collaborative connections and relationships with students and their support networks are established and maintained

- culturally safe and inclusive learning environments are created

- all students are taught and encouraged to understand and support each other's strengths and differences.

Always display calm, consistent and well-managed emotions and behaviour. This models safe emotional expression and behaviours and helps to create a supportive learning environment.

Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs

Teachers should engage with students, their parents/primary caregivers and allied health professionals (for example, psychologists) to ensure the support meets students' needs.

To identify students' preferences, strengths and needs:

- Identify situations where students are able to regulate their emotions and situations where they find this difficult.

- Observe the situations and contexts in which students can regulate their emotions as this may tell you whether you can support them to develop specific skills and/or whether aspects of the environment contribute to difficulty with regulation (e.g., noise and unpredictability).

- Collaborate with students, parents/primary caregivers and allied health professionals to share helpful information, such as successful strategies that students already use to regulate their emotions and potential situations or activities that make emotional regulation more difficult.

Behaviours may serve the function of obtaining or avoiding something, such as sensory input, attention or an object or activity. Working with others to identify the function of a behaviour using an **Antecedent, Behaviour and Consequence (ABC)** chart may help in selecting effective supports. The antecedent is what happened before the behaviour occurred and the consequence is the events that followed the behaviour.

First, identify the behaviours that are impacting students' learning or social connections (e.g., calling out, wandering around the classroom, refusing to complete learning tasks, verbal aggression such as swearing, or physical aggression towards staff or students).

Second, respond to the behaviours as appropriate, and then record them as instances in a chart that includes details of the behaviour itself, the lesson, learning task or activity, the date and time, and anything that occurs immediately before or after the behaviour, such as peer or adult interaction. Where possible, seek additional support for recording observational data in the chart. If this isn't available, record the data as soon as possible after the incident, noting this may have to be after a lesson has finished.

Table 1: Sample ABC Chart

Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence	Possible function
What happened before the behaviour?	**What was the challenging behaviour?**	**What were the events that followed the behaviour?**	**What is the student likely to be trying to obtain or avoid with this behaviour? (e.g., attention, an object, an activity, sensory input)**
Students were working independently on a maths question.	A student threw their book across the room and shouted 'I hate maths.'	The teacher told them to go to the quiet area. One of the other students picked up the book.	To escape from a feeling of frustration during a difficult or non-preferred task.

After completing the ABC chart, review the observational data and look for patterns.

» Does the behaviour happen at a particular time or during a specific activity
(e.g., afternoons or when reading)?

» Are there specific times or activities when the behaviour does not happen (e.g., never in group work)?

» What happens before and after the behaviour, and are there any patterns
(e.g., reprimand by teacher, laughed at by peers)?

Note you may need to collect multiple ABC scenarios with clear and detailed information before you begin hypothesising the function of a behaviour and selecting appropriate supports.

You might discuss the results of the analysis with students and parents/primary caregivers and seek guidance from a specialist teacher or allied health professional to better understand the information collected and what it might mean. Provide students with time and support to process and communicate in these conversations, as some may find it hard to communicate what led to a situation where they experienced difficulty regulating their emotions.

Use the information gathered to select appropriate supports. For example, you can work with the student to create a step-by-step guide for what they do to prepare for the task and teach them how to respectfully gain the attention of adults and their peers. Read AERO's practice guide on planning to support students' diverse needs for information on using an ABC chart.

Establish and maintain a calm and predictable learning environment

Proactive and preventative approaches that make the classroom predictable and behaviour expectations explicit will help all students regulate their emotions.

To establish a predictable learning environment for students:

- Ensure a clear structure and layout within the classroom.
  - Reduce clutter and distractions by organising and labelling work and storage areas,
    and reduce distracting visual displays.
  - Make sure tables are spaced so that students can move around the classroom effectively.
  - Ensure students have clear lines of sight to the teacher and visual displays.
  - Identify spaces where students can go to regulate, ensuring they can still be supervised.
  - Ensure storage areas are easy to access.

- Take a strength-based approach focusing on acknowledging or praising students meeting
  or exceeding expectations before responding to behaviours not meeting expectations.
  - Provide positive, immediate and explicit feedback about what students have done. For example,
    'I could see you were starting to get stressed. I'm glad you asked for a break straight away.'
  - Offer private acknowledgement or praise for students who dislike being singled out.

- Explicitly model, teach and practise classroom <u>routines</u> such as <u>entrance</u> and <u>exit routines</u>, transitions between activities, accessing materials, <u>getting help</u>, <u>completing learning tasks</u> and moving within the classroom and <u>around the school</u>.

- <u>Scaffold</u> students' learning, gradually reducing or removing the support when students are ready. For example, explicitly teaching the use of checklists to support students through more complex or lengthy tasks, using text and pictures if needed.

- Use verbal and non-verbal cues and visual reminders, such as lines on the floor to mark personal space when lining up, and clear labels and pictures on equipment containers. Remind students of expectations before activities begin.

- Respond calmly when students do not meet expectations. Respect their personal space when interacting. Give them time to process and respond to directions. Focus on the students' behaviour, not on the students – for example, 'Saying hurtful things to others is not OK.'

- Identify changes to expectations and routines and discuss these with students before they occur, including the reasons for the changes, what to expect and what is required of the students.

  – Consider rehearsing the changes with students and including parents/primary caregivers in preparing students for the changes.

  – Encourage students to identify their emotions and the reasons for them, then use self-calming strategies to increase their tolerance of uncertainty when changes or unexpected events occur. Students can use self-talk, such as 'I'm feeling anxious because I am not sure what will happen. I don't need to know exactly what will happen, all the other kids are here too, so I'll just focus on getting this task done.'

- Regularly <u>pause</u>, <u>scan</u> and <u>circulate</u> to monitor students and recognise when they show signs they may be finding it difficult to emotionally regulate (e.g., appearing tense or anxious). Intervene early when the emotion is less intense and support them in expressing their emotions and needs and/or using self-regulation strategies.

- Emotional coaching approaches allow students to manage emotions before they become overwhelming. For example, 'I can see you are getting tense. Have a stretch and move on to the next question. I will help you when I finish helping this student.' Some students may prefer you to offer this support discreetly to avoid embarrassment. You can also ask students if something else would help.

- Explicitly teach and model <u>social skills</u> for students, such as asking to borrow materials, asking to join a game, responding to requests to borrow materials and taking turns to reduce the potential for conflict. For example, during a group task, you may provide a limited number of resources (e.g., only one dictionary) and remind students that they will have to ask peers for their turn and also give others a turn when this is requested. Rehearse requests 'Can I have the dictionary now, please?' and responses 'Sorry, I need to look up one more word and then you can have it'.

- Allow time for students to return to a calm state before addressing an event in which they found it hard to emotionally regulate. This may mean waiting until the end of a lesson or even the next day. Consider having a parent/primary caregiver or support person present.

- Explicitly teach and model self-advocacy skills to ensure students are able to ask for help expressing and regulating their emotions.

- Ensure you communicate the students' strategies to all their teachers with cues and prompts that can be used in all of the students' lessons.

Explicitly teach and model how to recognise, understand and manage emotions

When students experience strong emotions, they may have reduced comprehension and difficulty expressing themselves. Recognise that they may be incapable of responding to verbal or non-verbal directions in these situations and that their lack of response may not be a choice. It's important to explicitly teach and model for students how to recognise, understand and safely express their emotions.

- Explicitly teach, model and support students to recognise bodily sensations and how they relate to emotions.

  – Discuss the physiological signs of anger (going red in the face, tightening muscles, clenched fists) or of anxiety (fidgeting, being distracted, butterflies in the stomach) and relate these signs to emotional vocabulary and sources of support.

  – Model awareness of your own emotions, bodily sensations and self-calming strategies as opportunities arise. For example, 'My neck and shoulders feel tense. I'm going to shrug my shoulders up and down five times to help relax my body.'

- Explicitly teach and model the use of emotional vocabulary so students can recognise and name their own emotions and the emotions of others.

  – Discuss, display and regularly review age-appropriate emotional vocabulary. Highlight when students use the emotional vocabulary to identify their emotions.

  – Model how you name your emotions and the emotions of others. For example, 'I am feeling very excited about our excursion today.'

  – Provide students with language or a visual sign to indicate when they are beginning to feel overwhelmed.

  – Acknowledge students when they use emotional vocabulary appropriate to the time, place or context. For example, a student may say 'X is annoying me' instead of pushing X away.

- Explicitly teach and model a step-by-step approach for solving social conflicts and emotional challenges: identifying the problem, exploring solutions, evaluating options and choosing a solution.

- Explicitly teach and model how to recognise facial expressions and body movements associated with emotions. Use photographs of faces and have students identify the emotion and perhaps suggest why the person would feel that way.

- Provide visual supports that could assist students to recognise and name emotions, such as pictures of faces and descriptions of feelings with the emotion label.

  – Display an 'emotional thermometer' that shows a scale from 0 to 10 to indicate the intensity of emotions such as stress or anxiety. The teacher and other students may also have their own emotional thermometer so that students know everyone needs to practise emotional regulation. This also helps students who may find it harder to regulate their emotions to not feel like they have been singled out.

  – Create pictorial and text supports for self-talk (e.g., a card with 3 instructions: If I feel angry, I need to take deep breaths, relax my muscles, think about something else until I am calm).

- Name the emotion when you see signs of it in students (e.g., 'I can see you are feeling frustrated. Let's take some deep breaths together'). Always label the emotion as a feeling and avoid language that labels the student. For example, 'It looks like you are feeling angry' instead of 'It looks like you are angry.'

- Discuss real and fictional situations across a variety of contexts (e.g., in the playground, in the classroom and on an excursion), addressing when and why certain emotions might occur, how people might interpret them, and why people may have different perspectives.

- Explicitly teach and model self-calming strategies. Ensure students know what the strategies are for, and how the strategies can be helpful to them. Schedule this for the same time every day so that students come to expect it as their daily routine. Remind students of the self-calming strategies when required. Strategies could include:

  - deep breathing (slowly inhaling and exhaling while counting)

  - using a quiet voice (student deliberately lowers voice and slows down speech)

  - counting to 10 (before acting, the student stops and counts to 10 slowly)

  - relaxing tight muscles

  - walking away (instead of responding to a social situation)

  - using self-talk (student reminds themselves of strategies – for example 'I'm feeling angry. I'll walk away and then do my breathing').

- Support students in using self-calming by modelling and using the strategies with them. For example, sit or stand beside a student in a non-confrontational way, acknowledge their feelings and say, 'I can see you are feeling angry. Let's do slow breathing together.' Breathe in and count with the student, breathe out and count with the student.

- Role play potential scenarios. For example, discuss and role play how students might respond to a peer who is angry about being asked to wait their turn in a game and how the peer might manage their anger (by reminding themselves they will get a turn and to watch the game while they wait).

- Model self-talk as a way of dealing with emotion (e.g., 'I'm feeling anxious because I am not sure what will happen') or controlling impulsivity and deciding on a course of action (e.g., 'I feel frustrated when I can't do a maths problem. I need to stop and take a deep breath and look at the worked examples or ask my buddy for help').

- Explicitly teach and model how to request a break to allow calming when students feel overwhelmed (for example, by using a break card to access a quiet area for a predetermined time).

  - Provide scheduled breaks within the school day – for example a short break after a task has been completed or when transitioning between tasks, or read a story between more demanding academic activities.

  - For consistency and safety, set parameters on what occurs during a break, how long it will be, where students are allowed to go, and who accompanies them. When setting these expectations, also establish when you will review this with students.

Make adjustments to support students' emotional regulation

Strong emotions and consequent difficulties in regulating emotions may occur in response to changes in the environment. Proactive and preventative approaches to establish predictable, safe and supportive learning environments help all students to safely express their emotions. Collaboration with the students, parents/primary caregivers and other professionals, particularly allied health professionals, is part of these approaches. It will help identify potential precursors for students experiencing difficulties regulating their emotions that can be removed or reduced.

To reduce potential precursors:

- Discuss the learning environment with students to help identify situations or activities where students may find it hard to regulate their emotions.

- Carry out a sensory audit with students and remove or reduce stimuli that might affect students with sensory differences, such as reducing noise and distracting displays.

- Check that students understand the purpose of learning activities and how they are carried out. Be clear about what they should know and be able to do. Explain learning objectives and, where possible, how they link to students' strengths and interests. Scaffold students' learning as needed.

- Monitor students' engagement in learning tasks, provide feedback and be alert for signs that students may need some support with their learning or with regulating their emotions.

- Consider strategies to ensure access to curriculum content and learning tasks to prevent students feeling frustrated and being unable to regulate emotions (e.g., text-to-speech software, fill-in-the-blanks templates for note taking and using true/false or multiple-choice questions in assessments).

- Break learning and tasks into small, manageable steps.

- Offer extension activities and open-ended tasks for students who finish work quickly or require more challenging work.

- Provide regular acknowledgement and praise to students and build relationships by asking questions, providing feedback, and acknowledging academic responses and positive social behaviour.

- Monitor social interactions with peers in the classroom, on the playground and other environments and provide support to resolve difficulties. Intervene in a more direct way when needed. Whole-school anti-bullying and anti-racism policies and practices will help you to reinforce school rules and values, and to plan and deliver lessons to develop safe and inclusive learning environments.

Reflection questions

- How do you collaborate with students, their parents/primary caregivers, support staff and allied health professionals to identify, plan for and support students' emotional needs and celebrate their progress in learning as well as social and emotional development?

- How do you acknowledge and praise students when you see displays of regulated behaviour?

- How have you identified the situations in which regulated behaviour occurs as well as those in which this is difficult for students?

- Which strategies will you use to teach and support your students to regulate their emotions? How will you monitor and review their effectiveness?

Further reading

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Acknowledgements