

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Managing Emotions



What You Need to Know

At times, we all feel strong and intense emotions, and over time we eventually develop the skills needed to regulate these feelings. During infancy, however, these skills have not yet emerged, and infants rely heavily on those who care for them to help calm and soothe them during these times. Infants are not able to use words to effectively communicate what they feel. Instead, they must rely on expressing themselves the only way that they know how – through behavior. When infants giggle, cry, scream, bounce, or throw things, they are both reacting to how they feel while simultaneously giving *you* the cues needed to detect and respond to their emotional needs. As one of their primary caregivers, you play a key role in managing infants’ strong emotions *for* them by tuning in, attending, and responding to infants’ unique emotional experiences with warmth, nurturance, and support.

Things to Consider

- ◆ Infants each have different temperaments (e.g., thresholds and ways of reacting emotionally to situations). As one of the important caregivers in their lives, you play an important role in recognizing and applying what you know about each infant to best support and help them navigate their strong emotions. This includes understanding which things trigger strong emotions and which things help support and soothe each infant during these times. For example, while singing may be soothing for some infants, this may add to stress for those who prefer silence. Or, while one infant may become easily upset when disrupted during naptime, another may be able to easily fall back asleep.
- ◆ It can be very challenging (and tiring) when we are unable to soothe an infant who is upset. During these times, patience and problem-solving are key. Step back and use what you know about *why* the infant may be upset in that moment and *how* they prefer to be soothed. This can help you better understand what the infant may be needing at that time.

Development of Ability to Manage Emotions

Between birth and 9 months, children may:	Between 8 and 18 months, children may:
Engage with familiar adults for calming and comfort.	Look to or seek comfort when distressed and accepts reassurance from a familiar adult.
Quiet or stop crying when held, gently rocked, or talked to by a familiar adult.	Engage in self-comforting behaviors (e.g., sucking fingers/thumb) to calm self when upset or in new situations.
Try to calm self by sucking on fingers or thumb when overly excited or distressed.	

Setting the Stage

Infants are best prepared to handle strong emotions when they feel safe, secure, and cared for. So it’s important that you cultivate a classroom environment that is supportive, consistent (yet flexible), and enjoyable to be in. Refer to “Relate: Teacher-Child Relationship” for more on laying the foundation that will help infants see you as a resource and feel connected and safe so that they can express and recover from strong emotions.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Managing Emotions

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe the infants in your classroom. How do your infants differ in their emotional reactions? Are there some infants who mostly “go with the flow,” or do some have a hard time when something unexpected arises? What do infants typically do when they experience a strong emotion? Do some infants automatically seek your comfort for reassurance? Use this information to cater <i>how</i> you respond to and support infants when they are experiencing strong emotions.
Tuesday FOCUS	Acknowledge and Accept Strong Emotions Focus on labeling and showing acceptance of infants’ display of strong emotions. Do this by getting on their level and using soft, gentle expressions in acknowledging emotions and providing comfort. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “I see you are feeling sad that Daddy had to go. It’s okay, I am here for you. Let’s go sit on the rocking chair for a little while.”◆ “You are feeling very angry that I have to change your diaper. It’s ok, you don’t like this. I am going to be extra gentle, and we’ll be done soon!”
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Use Calm-Down Strategies Infants oftentimes show strong emotions when their basic needs are not being met (e.g., hunger, tired, or a full diaper) – in these cases, a simple solution may be the answer (e.g., snack, nap, or diaper change). However, for times when this is not the case, take what you know about each infant and select a strategy that will help them calm down in-the-moment. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Singing or playing soft music◆ Movement (e.g., rocking, or bouncing)◆ Physical comfort (e.g., hugging, rubbing back, holding, or swaddle in blanket)◆ Soothing object (e.g., favorite stuffed animal, or pacifier)
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Connect to Children Focus on connecting emotionally with infants. Let them know that you understand and are there to help them. Tune in to how they feel in different situations, what is difficult for them, and what triggers their emotions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ When an infant enters the classroom, smile and say, “I’m so glad to see you this morning! I think you are happy too!” while picking them up to hold them.◆ Provide comfort through your presence with genuine concern through the words, “I’m right here,” and/or by hugging, rocking, or patting them gently.
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants this week. Check in and ask yourself: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ How did they react to your support? What worked best?◆ What times of day or contexts were hardest for infants? How can you change them?◆ Are there other things that you might change in your classroom to avoid unnecessary negative emotions (e.g., a certain toy that makes infants really upset)?