

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Supporting Children's Strong Emotions



What You Need to Know

Just like adults, all children feel strong emotions at times, especially when things don't go the way they expect. Feelings like anger, frustration, and sadness are a normal part of life, and as we grow, we develop skills to regulate these emotions (i.e., self-control skills to manage our emotions). Often, preschoolers haven't yet developed the skills needed to express what they feel and need or to manage their strong emotions.

Sometimes adults misinterpret children's emotional expressions as purposeful 'acting out.' Rather, children are expressing their feelings the only way they know how. They need your help to manage their emotions so that they can get the most of their time in the classroom. You can do this by preparing children **beforehand** and providing support and comfort **in the moment** that lets them know that strong emotions are important and overwhelming but together, you can work through them.

Things to Consider

On this Summary Sheet, you will focus on preparing and supporting children **before** the peak of their strong emotions. However, most preschoolers will need ongoing guidance and support from a trusted adult over time to eventually use self-regulation strategies with less support or even independently.

Development of Ability to Manage Emotions

| Between 36 and 48 months, children <i>may</i> : | Between 48 and 60 months, children <i>may</i> : |
|---|--|
| Express a broad range of emotions across contexts. | Begin to notice subtler or complex emotions in self and others (e.g., embarrassed, worried). |
| Notice when others exhibit strong emotions. | Use words to describe feelings of self and others. |
| Begin to use words to describe basic emotions. | Exhibit an expanding range of strategies for managing more distressing emotions. |
| Demonstrate the ability to manage less intense emotions (i.e., mild frustration) but still require adult support to manage more intense emotions. | Show increasing skill in managing emotions independently. |

Setting the Stage

Children are best prepared to handle strong emotions when they feel safe, secure, and cared for. It's important that you cultivate a classroom environment that is supportive, consistent (yet flexible), and enjoyable. Refer to "Relate: Building a Strong Teacher-Child Relationship" for more on laying the foundation that will help children see you as a resource and feel connected and safe so that they can express and recover from strong emotions.

For many children, especially those with certain disabilities, issues often arise, or emotions get too "big" when they cannot communicate their wants, ideas, and needs. Labeling emotions and generally having a way to express their feelings (i.e., feelings chart, visuals with core words/AAC) can prevent or deescalate strong emotions or challenging behaviors. Directing kids to the appropriate vocabulary can help ease communicative frustration. Look to the "Regulate: Recognizing and Describing Emotions" resources for additional ideas.



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| OBSERVE | <p>OBSERVE</p> <p>Carefully observe the children in your classroom. All children are unique. Each has their own temperament—their approach and initial reaction to what happens in their world. How do your children differ in their emotional reactions? Are there some children who mostly "go with the flow," or do some children have a hard time when something unexpected arises? What do children typically do when they experience a strong emotion? Do some children automatically come to you for reassurance?</p> |
| FOCUS | <p>Acknowledge and Accept Strong Emotions</p> <p>Focus on labeling, accepting, and understanding that everyone feels strong emotions at times.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Reading a book, “Why do you think they’re so angry?” ◆ “Sometimes, we all feel frustrated or angry. I felt frustrated when...” ◆ “It can be frustrating when someone doesn’t understand what you said.” ◆ “You felt upset when your hands got wet. Sometimes we don’t like how things feel on our hands. I feel upset when I get glue on my fingers.” |
| SCAFFOLD I | <p>Use Calm-Down Techniques</p> <p>Introduce and practice strategies for calming down your body. Teaching children strategies for calming their bodies before they feel strong emotions gives them the tools that they will need in the moment when they <i>are</i> upset.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Use the Turtle Technique visual chart (i.e., go in shell, think and take deep breaths). ◆ Practice taking deep breaths (count to 3, lion’s breath). ◆ Tense and loosen muscles. ◆ Shake it out to music (or without). ◆ Introduce and visit a calm-down spot in the room (a quiet, soft place to relax and calm down). |
| SCAFFOLD II | <p>Connect to Children</p> <p>Focus on connecting emotionally with children. Let them know that you understand them and are there to help them. Tune in to how they feel in different situations and what is difficult for them or triggers their emotions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ “Can I help you with that?” ◆ “I’m so glad to see you this morning! I think you are happy too!” ◆ “Is it okay if we work together to fix this?” ◆ “I see you are breathing fast and heavy. I think you are feeling a lot of emotions right now. Let’s talk through them together.” |
| KEEP IT GOING | <p>Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday, as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Write a few sentences about each child describing how they tend to react emotionally and what the best way might be to help them manage these emotions. This observation will help you to individualize your responsiveness to each child’s regulatory needs.</p> |

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Supporting Children's Strong Emotions II



What You Need to Know

Previously, you focused on using Intentional Teaching Practices (ITPs) to prepare and support children **before** their strong emotions occur. On this Summary Sheet, you will focus on pulling those practices together to help children manage their emotions **in the moment** when children are very upset. By supporting them in the moment, you provide children with the safety, comfort, and confidence that they need to know that even though these feelings may be overwhelming, they're important and that with your help, they can work through these big emotions.

Things to Consider

When a young child becomes really frustrated and doesn't know how to fix a problem, a tantrum can result. Children have very little control over themselves in the middle of a tantrum, so this is NOT the time to discuss problems or solutions or teach a skill. In fact, doing so may actually make the situation worse. Instead, focus on helping the child calm down. Once calm, you can work with the child to figure out what happened and how to address it together.

It's important to step in and support children before emotions escalate but be careful not to "save the day" too soon. Research shows that a little bit of frustration or anxiety is good—it helps us persist, explore, and take on new challenges. In such instances, you can acknowledge their hard work and let them know that you are available for support if needed (e.g., "You are working hard to get that bucket open. I bet you can figure it out. I wonder what you can try next to get it open?").

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| <p>OBSERVE</p> | <p>OBSERVE</p> <p>Revisit the notes you took/descriptions you wrote about how children tend to react emotionally. Check-in throughout the week to be sure you are tuned in to children's reactions and triggers.</p> |
| <p>SCAFFOLD</p> | <p>Use All ITPs in the Moment</p> <p>When strong emotions occur, you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Connect to children: Notice as children begin to experience negative emotions—you can often prevent a temper tantrum or meltdown by intervening before the emotion gets too big for the child to handle. ◆ Acknowledge and accept strong emotions: “I see you are feeling sad that your mom had to leave.” Avoid asking too many questions in-the-moment, as this may overwhelm the child even more. Instead, label and narrate their strong emotions. ◆ Prompt children to use calm-down techniques: “We need to calm your body. Can you take a deep breath as we practiced? Now blow it out like a lion; well done. Let's do it again.” ◆ Connect to children: Provide comfort with your presence with genuine concern through words “I’m right here,” and/or with a hug or pat on the back. <p>Note:</p> <p>In moments when tantrums evolve into meltdowns, children may struggle to regulate their emotions and may require additional support to calm down. Meltdowns often result from intense tantrums or sensory overload, requiring a sensory cure. Some calming strategies may include calming music, a tight squeeze in a blanket/hug, a crunchy snack, a sip of cold water, or engaging in a preferred activity.</p> |
| <p>KEEP IT GOING</p> | <p>Consider what you learn from observing children this week. Check-in and ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ How did they react to your support? What worked best? ◆ What times of day or contexts were the hardest for children? How can you change them? ◆ Are there other things that you might change in your classroom to avoid unnecessary negative emotions (e.g., there might be a toy that makes children really upset, and you realize that toy is really a toy for older children)? |