



Hampshire  
County Council

Virtual School

# Emotional and behavioural regulation: supportive strategies

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# PEP toolkit: emotional and behavioural regulation

## Introduction

Self-regulation (or self-control) is also an area of executive functioning but warrants a chapter of its own as the needs in this area are complex and often cause the most difficulties in schools.

## What is self-regulation?

Some pupils find learning to manage their behaviour more difficult it more difficult than others of the same age. In school, they may present as impulsive, not guarding against potential hazards and apparently failing to learn from experience. They behave like much younger pupils in this area of their development and are at risk of being perceived as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. We expect small children to respond impulsively. For example, see a puddle and jump in it or, without looking, run into the road after a ball. Adults are aware and vigilant, so they can act as an external source of regulation while the children gradually develop self-regulation.

In order to self-regulate using good judgement in a range of situations, we need to go through a series of stages, starting with accepting responsibility for our behaviour.

We also need to develop a number of skills that are mediated by language, some examples of which are listed below:

- The **ability to label emotional states** helps us recognise and control these states (Kopp, 1989).

- The **separation of emotions from actions** (Berkley, 1995, as cited in Ripley, 2009), such as swearing at a teacher may relieve immediate feelings but puts a pupil at risk of exclusion.
- The **internalisation of rules** to understand acceptable behaviour in different settings.
- **Planning ahead to accommodate future events.** This supports many activities that involve goal directed behaviour. For example, I will make the football team if I train regularly. Problem-solving in the classroom also involves working towards a goal for completing the task and thinking of the consequences of finishing or not finishing before recreational time.

### **The early years before self-regulation**

Very young children experience high states of arousal that are positive and negative. They rely on the adults around them who are attuned to their needs to manage those feelings and restore them to a comfortable state of arousal. Thus, we may drive our crying baby around in the car if this usually calms them, or anticipate the tears before bedtime when our toddler is over-excited by removing the sources of excitement and going into a familiar calming routine of bath/story/bed (Gerhardt, 2004). Children with secure attachments (relationships) to their carers find it easier to learn to regulate and modulate their behaviour according to the cognitive, emotional and social demands of specific situations (Rueda, Posner & Rothbart, 2007). Unfortunately, looked-after children often have fragmented early experiences that make it difficult to form secure attachments to key adults. They are often not exposed to adults who are

attuned to their needs. This can result in poor self-regulatory abilities regarding learning and behaviour, particularly salient in the school context.

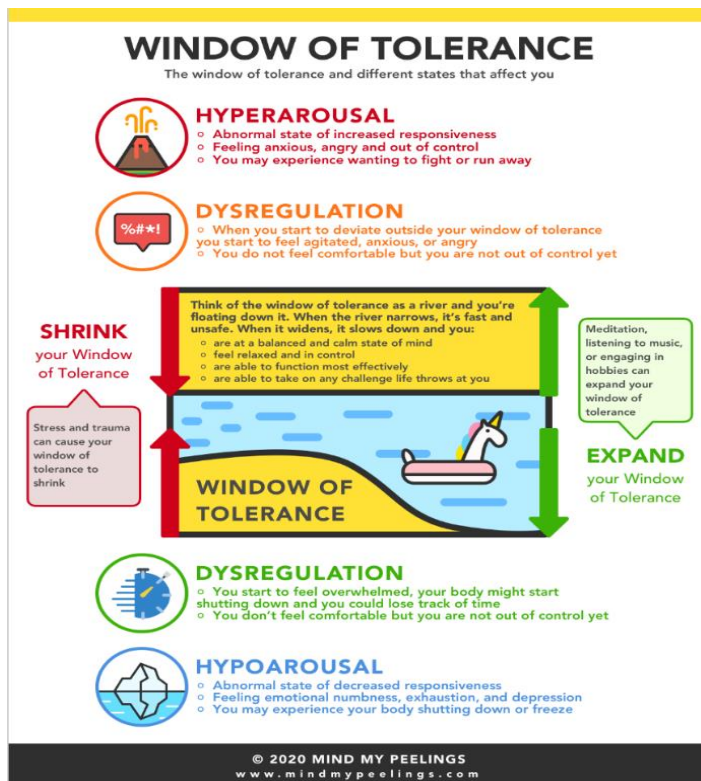
When a child or young person becomes dysregulated, they can have difficulties with the following:

- having **uncontrolled emotional outbursts (anger, anxiety, distress)**
- **poor frustration tolerance** – difficulty controlling reactions
- **overreaction to attention** (may become loud, overexcited)
- **sensory regulation difficulties** sensory regulation difficulties (this is often related to early neglect). Children can be triggered by noise, visual stimuli, textures, sudden movement, smells, seeking proprioceptive input through activities such as fiddling, climbing, rough-housing/handsy and vestibular input through movement and fidgeting. **This leads to:**
  - **attention regulation difficulties**
  - difficulties with **unstructured time**
  - experiencing **overwhelming feelings** that do not appear to have triggers
  - **overreaction to unseen triggers** (memories, curriculum howlers, reminders, similarities by look, smells, etc).

**Box 1 – the window of tolerance**

The **window of tolerance (Siegal, 1999)** shown in **Figure 1** can be a helpful way of understanding emotional states in individuals, especially children and young people. It is a concept used to describe the optimal zone of arousal which enables us to thrive and function well in everyday life. When we are outside of this window of tolerance, it impacts our ability to process stimuli effectively and we tend to react quickly and automatically to the subtlest signs of danger

Figure 1



Flipping your Lid can be shared with children [The Hand Model of the Brain](#)  
[\(youtube.com\)](#)

## Strategies and interventions

### **Box 2 – teaching children to self-regulate**

In order to self-regulate and use good judgement in a range of situations, we need to go through a series of stages, starting with accepting responsibility for our own behaviour. As teachers, we often talk about managing behaviour and discipline. We do not necessarily talk about teaching behaviour. We have expectations of behaviour and manage the behaviour we don't want to see. It is often necessary to step back from managing behaviour and begin to teach pupils the skills they need for effective behaviour in order to learn, socialise and manage their feelings

### **Classroom approaches to manage emotional and behavioural dysregulation.**

#### **General:**

- consistent, fair boundaries make the world seem more predictable and less scary
- try to maintain predictable routines and schedules

#### **Connection before correction approach – Dan Siegal (1999)**

- during periods of heightened emotions when children are dysregulated, it is important to learn, think and reflect
- children need to learn to calm their fight/flight response
- relating requires relating and connecting through attuned adult-sensitive relationships
- only when fight/flight is calm can adults use reason to develop reflection
- The process of **co-regulating** is essential to learn to self-reflect

- children need to feel physically and emotionally settled to do this
- children need to feel comfortable, safe and connected
- children can then access the reason and learn to problem solve and reflect on alternative solutions. See [Home \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk) for more information on fight/flight in trauma responses

**PACE approaches:** use of PACE (**playful, acceptance, curiosity and empathy**) developed by Dan Hughes

**Playfulness:** sharing positive emotions, using appropriate humour, reducing authority, and promoting a sense of connection by showing an interest and defusing stressful demands with play and humour.

**Acceptance:** showing that you understand difficulties and provide an atmosphere to explore and communicate experiences safely.

**Curiosity:** exploring children's thoughts and feelings without judgement to understand the reasons why they feel the way they do, such as "I'm wondering if you're finding this work difficult, and that is why you became so upset?"

**Empathy:** to connect with children's emotional perspective by acknowledging and validating their feelings, such as "You are upset right now; this is really tough", and when difficult situations arise in everyday interactions with adults.

**Calm children with slower movements:** children will benefit from the adults remaining calm and tuning in with genuine curiosity to their feelings, thoughts, needs and wishes and supporting problem-solving.



Make regular use of **validation and empathy** to show them that they remain **interested in understanding their feelings and linking these to what has happened around them.**

- It is important to continually demonstrate **unconditional acceptance** by using phrases such as, “We had a tricky day today, didn’t we. Let’s sort this out together”, and to express compassion with phrases such as “It’s okay, everyone makes mistakes. Now, let’s find a way to turn this around.”
- The following website will help with this: what is meant by PACE? DDP network [about DDP - DDP Network](#)

### **Emotion coaching**

Use emotion coaching to help label and validate emotions and guide to appropriate self-regulation strategies, such as a quiet space or being read to. This support should focus on helping children in recognising the initial warning signs of their feelings of frustration and anger and developing strategies to deal with these feelings in a socially appropriate way.

The stages of emotion coaching are as follows:

- **recognise the child’s emotions and empathise with them**
- **validate and label the child’s feelings**
- **set limits on the behaviour if needed**
- **problem-solving with child (reason)**

- **Then, they will be able to access the reason and learn to problem solve and reflect on alternative solutions**

For further information see: [Emotion Coaching - United Kingdom \(emotioncoachinguk.com\)](http://emotioncoachinguk.com)

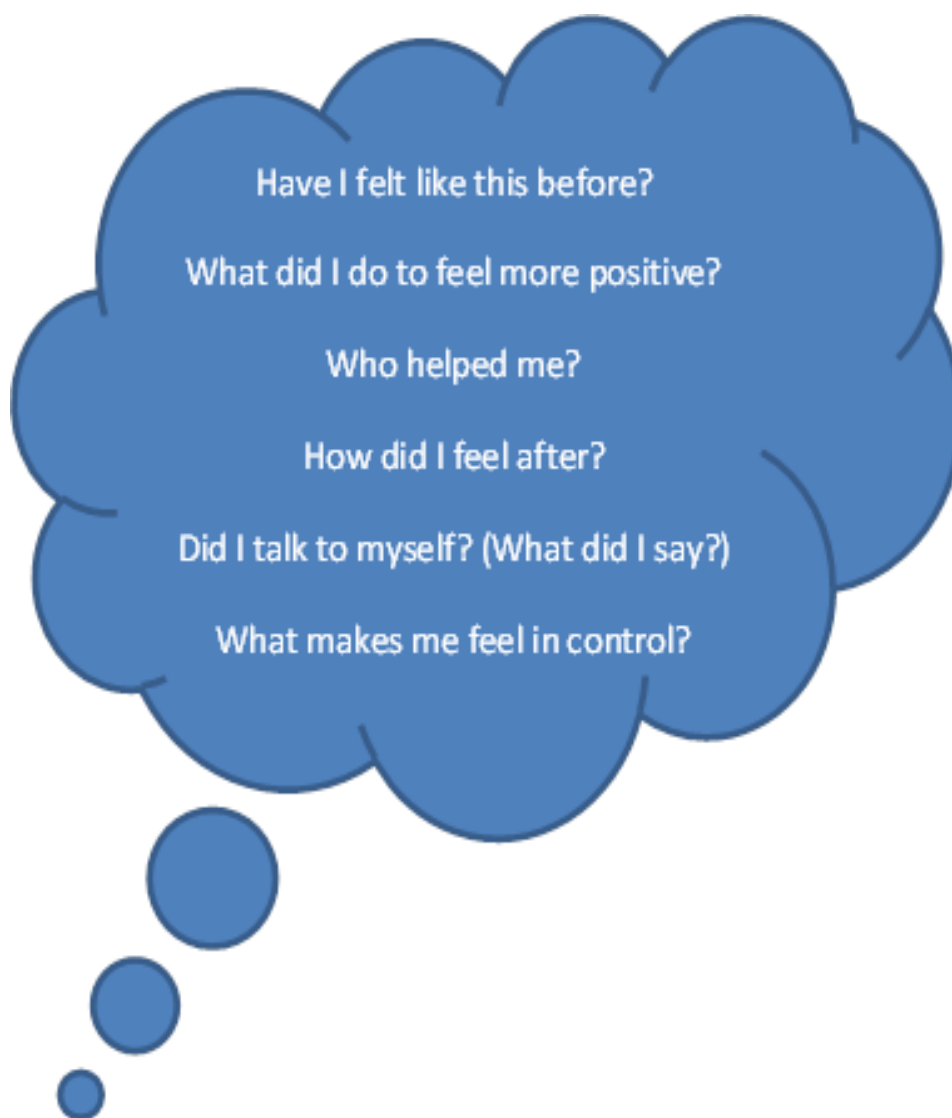
### **Teaching children to self-regulate**

Pupils who are in a fight/flight state and subsequently have high levels of arousal will find it hard to sit still or regulate their behaviour. They will need an adult to do this for them. Adults will need to co-regulate the child's behaviour and use lots of 'we' and 'us' language to help the child calm down. It is important not to leave them to do this on their own. This is where 'time out' may not be appropriate, as this can cause a highly aroused and traumatised child to become more agitated. 'Time in' is a better way of working with the child and showing them how to regulate their emotions. If the child is exposed to this calming verbal commentary over time, they will eventually internalise it and start regulating themselves independently. Key members of staff with whom the child has a positive bond can also start teaching the child activities to help them calm down independently. Perhaps the adult can work with the child to develop a first aid kit of strategies.

## Stages of co-regulation

Identify	<b>Identify the feelings in the body:</b> help the child/young person identify their feelings. You may need to do some body awareness activities. Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) resources have useful ways to do it.
Teach	<b>Teach them feeling words:</b> the child/young person will need to develop a feelings vocabulary. You can do this by labelling the feelings for the child/young person and then carrying out emotional literacy work around identifying feelings.
Wonder	<b>Wonder aloud using empathic commentary:</b> adults provide a commentary for the children/young people and wonder aloud ("I think you may be feeling like this ... as I noticed ...")
Develop	<b>Develop self-awareness:</b> teach children to differentiate behaviours, thoughts and feelings.
Need	<b>Children in fight/flight will need adult co-regulation:</b> pupils in a fight/flight state and, subsequently, high levels of arousal will find it hard to sit still or regulate their behaviour. They will need an adult to do this for them.
Do not use	<b>Do not use behavioural approaches:</b> do not offer choices or use sanction-driven language when a child is dysregulated. It is not effective and can escalate a situation.

## Independent self-regulation



The following guidelines are recommended to support children and young

people in independent self-regulation. In an intervention study piloted in Hampshire around developing self-regulation skills in looked-after children (see Warhurst, Alfano and Ripley, 2011), teachers reported the following to help assist looked-after children in self-regulating.

Help the child/young person identify how they are feeling. You may need to do some **body awareness activities**. There is high importance given to engaging in activities that teach and promote the calming of a child/YP's sensory/limbic system, which is highly activated. Many children with such complex needs are functioning at a high arousal state, and the priority of the approach should be to "facilitate a controlled and regulated response to stimuli and engagement with others" (Bhreathnach, 2013).

Helpful resources are:

- the Scared Gang story books in sessions designed to help children understand their own stress patterns (written by Dr Éadaoin Bhreathnach)
- the 'just right state' programme, which incorporates elements of the 'zones of regulation' programme by Leah Kuypers. It aims to help young people recognise their bodily responses to stress and pain, become mindful of their triggers and develop a common language to describe their feelings
- **outdoor activity:** include as much outdoor physical activity as possible, including den building and activities with a competitive element, such as helping to design and partake in assault courses. Other examples of games are following the adult lead, getting faster and faster, alternating swinging/climbing activities with adult scaffolding, following adult sequences of jumping up and down, hopping and marching, and standing really still

These must be followed by the following before formal learning:

[Brainstem Calmer Activities \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://beaconhouse.org.uk)

[Self-Regulation | ebsaic \(sensoryattachmentintervention.com\)](https://sensoryattachmentintervention.com)

[Grounding Techniques That Involve Your Children — Atlanta Wellness Collective | Expert Guidance to Live Life Well \(atlwell.com\)](https://atlwell.com)

**Here are some other examples of brain stem calmers:**

- blowing bubbles and popping them with adult interaction. However, ask the child to sit still while doing this to help regulate the body
- breathing exercises with adult scaffolding
- calming music and relaxation strategies with adult scaffolding
- colouring
- The child will need to develop a vocabulary of feelings. You can do this by labelling the feelings for the child and carrying out emotional literacy work around identifying feelings.
- adults to provide a commentary for the children/young people and wonder aloud (“I think you may be feeling like this, as I noticed ...”). This helps children and young people to:
  - develop self-awareness
  - differentiate behaviours, thoughts and feelings

The following outlines classroom strategies to support **emotional dysregulation related to anxiety**.

When children are experiencing emotional dysregulation, they may experience anxious and fearful thoughts, including their ability to cope with school. Physiological symptoms of anxiety may also accompany these feelings and may start the night before or even a few days before school. To avoid these overwhelming emotions and the fear associated with school attendance, the child/young person may withdraw from the situation, refusing to get ready for school or to leave the house or enter the school and do anything to avoid the ‘threatening’ situation, including

attending to their learning and to try and control what feels like a very out-of-control situation (Thambirajah et al, 2008). They may also seek high levels of reassurance from adults. However, this still does not appear to reduce their anxiety (HEP EBSA Guidance, 2023).

**Box 3 – avoidance and control (task refusal) as a strategy to manage anxiety**

Avoidance and reassurance can provide temporary relief from anxiety. However, in the long term, both can have an adverse effect as it provides evidence that one is unable to cope or manage themselves. Unfortunately, avoidance as a strategy is powerful because the relief we get from avoiding something is an extremely strong, positive feeling and reinforces its use for future situations (negative reinforcement). However, whilst avoidance provides short-term relief, it has the effect of reinforcing beliefs about threat, leading to beliefs going unchallenged, and it can have a negative impact on several aspects of learning, including perseverance, willingness to take risks and to use problem-solving as a way of coping with challenges. This can impact resilience and our ability to thrive, mature, and progress confidently under challenging circumstances in order to help emotional dysregulation.

**Classroom strategies to manage anxiety**

**Transitions and changes:** staff need to ensure that the children’s day follows a predictable routine and they are prepared for any changes that might occur, such as OOPS cards to pre-empt changes in tasks and transition times. These changes in the day can be discussed each morning with trusted adults.

**Scheduled quiet times:** learning can be demanding for very anxious children, so it is important for staff to introduce ‘quiet times’ with reduced sensory load (quiet environment and teacher volume, calm approaches, less movement, reduced transitions, fewer students) when high concentration is required.

**Mapping the day:** as a class, identify specific aspects in the classroom and parts of the school that may be difficult for the children and put in place resources/strategies to support this, such as escape routes, sensory tents, sensory diet, etc.

- children can think of things that can help them and they can put together a **class toolbox**
- ask them to think about times they coped with their worries
- help children acknowledge the steps they have taken and celebrate the small successes

**The following strategies have been taken from the HEP guidance on EBSA**

- Think about your thoughts and feelings about school and what these would look like if they could be drawn
- It also helps to externalise the anxiety: **what name would you give the feeling that you experience** when you think about going to school? If it was a thing, what would it look like? What would it say?
- How does the ... get in the way of you attending school?
- When is ... in charge, and when are you in charge?
- Ask them to draw **how their body feels when they are worried.**
- **Use a scale or an anxiety thermometer** to ask the child what aspects of school they find difficult. Some areas to consider are the physical environment (toilets, corridors, assembly hall), times of the day or social interactions (arriving at school, play and breaktimes, lining up to go into school or classroom, lunchtimes, going home, changing for PE), particular lessons or activities within lessons (writing, working as part of a group, reading aloud, verbally answering a question).

### **Strategies to manage demand avoidance:**

- the **visual clarification methods (symbol strips, written messages and cartoon drawings)** can be used to de-personalises demands
- **expectations should be disguised** where possible and reduced to a minimum. Confrontation should be avoided where possible
- **ground rules need to be as few as possible but then maintained using techniques such as passing over responsibility** (“I’m sorry but it’s a health and safety requirement”), de-personalising (through the use of imaginary characters, visual clarification etc.) and giving choices that allow the child a feeling of autonomy
- humour can also be helpful and be used to coax and cajole the child

### **The following phrases can be used by school staff to manage demand avoidance in the classroom:**

- Let’s see if we can make something
- I can’t see how to make this work
- Shall we see if we can beat the clock?
- Maybe we could investigate
- Who do you want to help us today?

### **Examples of language to avoid:**

- It’s time for you to ...
- You’ve got to ...
- You need to ...
- You must ...
- Frame expectations by using the language of **needing your help**



Children with **demand avoidance require structured opportunities for them to feel in control. These strategies will also help with anxiety-induced avoidance behaviours.** These could include:

- fixed choice, such as “Would you like to do this or that?”
- reducing demands on them when their levels of anxiety or frustration are increasing
- renaming activities as a joint problem-solving adventure so that the task appears with fewer directives and made into a game
- Use joint problem-solving approach “How can we ...?”
- reconceptualisation of a reward system. Demand-avoidant children often see rewards as demands, and they could reinforce anxiety. The surprise of spontaneous rewards may be more effective than a planned reward based on giving in to a perceived demand

### **Sensory regulation**

The following links can support pupils manage their emotional and behavioural regulation related to sensory regulation:

- [Sensory audit for schools and classrooms \(education.gov.scot\)](https://www.education.gov.scot/education/primary/primary-4/primary-4-2019-2020/primary-4-2019-2020-sensory-audit-for-schools-and-classrooms)
- [Sensory-processing-pack-for-schools-KS1-4.pdf \(leicestershire.gov.uk\)](https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/leicestershire-education/sensory-processing-pack-for-schools-ks1-4.pdf)
- [NCSE - sensory spaces in schools](https://www.ncse.org.uk/primary/sensory-spaces-in-schools)