

Regulation of Affect



Regulation of affect involves the ability to manage one's feelings effectively in order to make decisions, control behavior, and complete a task. One must be able to sustain one's effort in the face of frustrations and difficulties. Individuals who can effectively regulate their feelings display the capacity of self-control and can easily adapt to varied social situations. They are able to label and describe their feelings and can generally recognize what is behind or the cause of one's feelings.

Home and School Situations Requiring Regulation of Affect

- Completing a lengthy or frustrating homework assignment or test
- Working with classmates on a group project
- Completing a difficult puzzle or riddle
- Playing and sharing with siblings or friends
- Completing a series of chores around the house
- Reacting appropriately to teacher or parental discipline
- Accepting an athletic team loss or perceived unfair situation

Hints and Strategies to Improve Regulation of Affect

- Model effective strategies for dealing with anger and frustration. Your child can learn how to appropriately express her feelings by observing your behavior. Model appropriate "stopping" behavior or take a "time out." To properly model this, verbalize your strategy. For example, say, "The computer's not working, I'm going to walk away for a few minutes, then when I'm calm I'll come back and figure out how to fix it, or who to call for help. If I allowed myself to get upset about it, I'd probably take it out on somebody, regret that, and still have the computer problems."
- Have your child develop stories or narratives that explain her behaviors. By encouraging your child to talk about her feelings (for example, "I'm angry because my brothers always tease me when I lose"), she will often be able to better regulate her expression of feelings. Provide an example from your own experience, such as how you were upset when your boss gave you a large project to do on your way out the door from work, and describe how you handled your frustration. Role-play hypothetical scenarios and discuss various reactions.

- Don't sweat the small stuff. Regularly point out minor issues that could cause stress. For example, the school bus in front of you is stopping every 500 feet and you're in a hurry, or it is cloudy out when you've planned a beach trip. Use expressions such as, "Oh, well" or "Whatever," followed by a determination to move forward. This mentality is key to handling emotions and not getting stuck. Engage in discussions with your child to help her move concerns from the "big stuff" to the "small stuff" category.
- Work with your child to identify stressful situations ahead of time and encourage her to work towards practicing smaller, similar tasks. For example, if your child is extremely self-conscious, you can set gradual and age-appropriate goals to increase her ability to take on new challenges. These could include tasks such as calling friends and relatives on the phone, ordering food at a restaurant, or applying for a job.
- Use your child's video game play or introduction to a new digital technology as an opportunity to talk about frustration. Many children become visibly angry at their video games or video game consoles when they are sent back to the beginning of the game or cannot solve the problem. Similarly, they may experience some initial frustration when learning how to use a new cell-phone, setting up preferences on an iPod, or using a digital camera. Interestingly, the same children who may be more willing to go back and try to resolve these problems with video games and digital technologies may be rigid about doing the same with their homework. Use this as an opportunity to have a discussion with your child about the strategies, self thoughts, and approaches that she is using to overcome frustration with technologies and encourage her to redouble her efforts to overcome these obstacles.
- Do not be afraid to show your own frustrations; just be sure to not overdo it. Frustration and disappointment are a part of life and real-world modeling of this can be helpful. Use strategies such as self-talk, acceptance of situations that have not turned out how you would have liked them to, and "letting go." Demonstrating that you are upset but are coping effectively can be extremely valuable for children to observe. Talking about a previously frustrating and disappointing experience and how you were able to move on from it may be helpful as well.
- Watch home videos with your child of when they were much younger to illustrate how much they have matured. This is often an opportunity for children to engage in some reflection about interests, behaviors, and verbalizations that they would consider to be immature. Because the video is of your child when she was much younger, it is less threatening to discuss the need for improvement in her regulation of her feelings.

Books on Regulation of Affect

Cooper-Kahn, Joyce, Ph.D. and Laurie C. Dietzel, (2008). *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. [Chapter 11]

Cox, Adam J., Ph.D. (2007). *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control--The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. [Chapter 9]

Dawson, Peg, Ed.D. and Richard Guare, Ph.D. (2009). *Smart but Scattered*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press. [Chapter 13]

Goldberg, Pamela. (2003) *Become a Master of Self-Control: Meet Melly, Her Color is Mad*. Bloomington, IL: Camp Make Believe.

Richard, Gail J. and Jill K. Fahy. (2005). *The Source for Development of Executive Functions*. East Moline, IL: Lingua Systems.

Schwarzchild, Michael. (2000). *Helping Your Difficult Child Behave: A Guide to Improving Children's Self-Control-Without Losing Your Own*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com.

Websites and Articles on Regulation of Affect

LearningWorks For Kids (<http://www.learningworksforkids.com/EF/regulation.html>): The premier resource for executive function information, offering a detailed explanation of regulation of affect, tips for parents, and activities to improve this skill.

American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org/monitor/jun97/signals.html>): An article which summarizes research on the relationship between children's emotional regulation and consistent parenting.

KidsHealth (<http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/index.html>): This site offers a wealth of articles and information on various emotionally-heavy situations that children might face.

The Parents Zone (<http://www.theparentszone.com/child-development/emotions-in-children-how-to-manage-them/>): This site provides a bulleted list of tips for parents to help them assist their children in managing emotions.

Games and Activities That Can Practice Regulation of Affect

- Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) and Guitar Hero
DDR enhances regulation of affect because it is a fast-paced dancing game and players must fight frustration in order to be successful. Like DDR, Guitar Hero is a fast-paced guitar simulation game that requires players to follow button combinations, which can be very frustrating.
- Charades and Cranium
These games allow your child to work together with her team to achieve a goal. Having other team members model the appropriate behaviors for both success and failure will assist your child in practicing these responses.
- Team and Individual Sports
Many sports, such as swimming, baseball, and lacrosse, can be frustrating to children initially, thus offering them the opportunity to practice dealing with their frustration. Also, similar to Charades and Cranium, team sports can allow your child to observe and imitate teammates' appropriate reactions to failures and successes.
- Learning to play an instrument
Playing an instrument for the first time can be a frustrating experience and will require your child to exhibit regulation of emotions in order to successfully master the instrument.
- Jenga and Villa Paletti
Games, such as Jenga and Villa Paletti, will challenge its players to keep a tower of some sort standing upright, while each player takes turns removing pieces. This type of game can allow your child to practice monitoring her emotions to her own play, as well as her reactions to the playing of others.