

**PART 1**

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Why children react the way they do and how to help them learn to regulate their emotions.

By Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

**B**illy's Little League team was leading in a close game against the league leaders, and the team was ecstatic. In the final inning, the game turned and the other team pulled ahead by three runs. The pressure was on! The pitcher for Billy's team panicked and threw the ball to first base rather than home, permitting another runner to score.

Finally the other team struck out and Billy went up to bat, trembling. When he struck out, he was so mad that he threw his helmet onto the field. His father griped, "What drama! Can't he learn to control himself?"

A second boy, Eric, struck out and stoically left the field. Jack and Ian, on the other hand, burst into tears over the loss. One parent yelled, "Ten-year-old boys are too old to cry! Don't be babies." Another parent advised, "Don't cry — get mad!"

As the dejected team left the field one boy said, "I'm going to break their pitcher's leg."

As this scenario shows, there are dramatic differences in children's — and

parents' — responses to emotionally charged situations. Understanding the forces behind emotional reactions is the first step in helping children deal with life's frustrations and disappointments.

First it's important to define the terms: Emotions are responses to stimuli or situations that affect a person strongly. Watch how different teammates demonstrated the three levels of emotional response.

- The first— and most basic — level involves neurophysiological and biochemical reactions, including all the bodily processes regulated by the autonomic nervous system: heart rate, blood flow, respiration, hormone secretions and neural responses (EEG). For example, a person who is angry feels her heart race and her face get red. Billy's trembling was a neurophysiological expression.

- The second level of emotional response is motor and behavioral, where a person expresses emotion through actions, such as facial expressions, crying, sullen gazes or withdrawal.

Jack and Ian expressed their emotions behaviorally when they burst into tears, as did Billy when he hurled his helmet in anger. Leaving the field showed Eric's use of withdrawal, another behavioral expression of emotion.

- Still another boy expressed his feelings through words, revealing his cognitive or subjective response to the event. It's the third level, using language (spoken, written, or thought) to label feelings as in, "I feel frustrated."

## WHAT IS EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

Emotional regulation is the ability to control these responses to arousing situations. Emotional dysregulation refers to someone whose emotional responses are often out of control, like the child whose anger and aggression keep him from making and keeping friendships, or the child whose withdrawal from emotional challenges leads to avoiding any new activity.

Just as walking, talking and toilet training are developmental steps, emotional regulation is a developmental achieve-

ment. It's not present at birth.

At first regulation must be provided by the environment. The young infant who has a wet diaper expresses her distress in the only way she can — through crying. She needs outside help to reduce her tension. The parent helps by trying to understand the meaning of the baby's cries and taking the necessary action to calm her. And as we all know, some babies are easily calmed and others are more difficult. This suggests that infants are born with individual differences in their abilities to self-regulate.

In toddlerhood and the preschool years the child's emotional regulatory system starts to mature, and the burden of emotional regulation begins to shift from parent to child. As children develop language skills they become increasingly able to label their emotions, thoughts and intentions, which helps them regulate their emotional responses. In part, this means letting their parents know what they need in order to calm themselves.

By school age, children take greater responsibility for their own emotional functioning, but parents continue to have a major role. At this age, emotional regulation becomes more reflective, guided by the child's sense of self and the environment.

The extreme emotional responses of anger, distress, and excitement have been dampened to some extent by this age. Instead of hitting someone or exploding in a tantrum when he's angry, the school-age child will argue. Instead of expressing impatience by wailing, she can wait. Instead of expressing excitement by running around in circles, he can talk about how excited he is.

Moreover, as children develop their

own capacities for emotional regulation, they start to separate their internal reactions from external expressions. Thus we see the school-age child who can be quite distressed by an event but outwardly show no sign of emotion.

During adolescence, hormones enter the picture and create an upheaval in the child's emotional systems, challenging the emotional regulation learned over the years. Parents may feel as if their adolescent has regressed to the emotional regulatory stage of the preschooler!

### HOW QUICKLY DO CHILDREN LEARN EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

Just as there is a wide variation in when children start to walk or talk or learn to use the toilet, some children's self-regulatory systems develop more slowly than others'. We know little as yet about what contributes to these differences in timing. However, research suggests that at least three processes underlie children's growing ability to regulate their emotions:

**1. Neurological maturation.** The growth and development of the child's nervous system provides the "hardware" required for controlling emotional reactions.

**2. Temperament and developmental status.** Some children are more vulnerable to emotional dysregulation due to learning difficulties, language delays, attention deficits or temperament.

**3. Parental socialization and environmental support.** Differences in how families talk about feelings (their own and others') are related to later differences in the ways children express their feelings and regulate their emotions. Children who

experience chronic stress, or lack predictability and stability in their environment, have more problems with emotional regulation.

We cannot change a child's neurological system or her temperament and developmental status, but parents can help their children learn to regulate their emotions through the third factor, socialization and environmental support.

#### Here are some ways to help:

- Provide as much stability and consistency as possible.
- Accept your child's emotions and responses.
- Talk about your own feelings.
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings.
- Model self-control.
- Teach how to use positive self-talk.
- Identify typical situations that lead to emotional explosions and use them to teach problem-solving.
- Teach how to retreat into an emotional "turtle shell" to relax and calm down.
- Help children be aware of the stages that build up tension.
- Teach appropriate ways to express negative feelings.
- Praise efforts to regulate emotions.
- Help your child take a positive view of the future

To learn more about how these techniques work, see the continuation of this article in the next issue of *Parenting Insights*. ■

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**PART 2**

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Why children react the way they do and how to help them learn to regulate their emotions.

By Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

**C**hildren vary in how they react to emotionally charged situations and in how quickly they learn to bring their responses under control. Some of those differences are due to neurological maturity, temperament and developmental status and are largely beyond a parent's influence.

However, parents can have a major impact on children's ability to regulate their emotions by providing encouragement and support. Here are some ways to help your children bring their emotional responses under control.

**Provide stability and consistency**

Consistent limits, clear household rules and predictable routines help children know what to expect. When home feels stable and secure, children develop the emotional resources to deal with the less predictable world outside.

**Accept your child's emotions and emotional responses**

Children's emotional outbursts are not intentional, nor are they deliberate attempts to make parenting difficult. It is normal for children at times to sulk, to respond by yelling, cursing or breaking something, or to withdraw and want to be left alone. "Tuning in" and understanding your child's emotional states helps your child tolerate and cope with increasing amounts of emotional tension.

**Talk about your own feelings**

Use the language of feelings with your children, and they will begin to identify emotions accurately and put them into words. Research suggests that children who learn to use emotional language have more control over their nonverbal emotional expressions, which in turn enhances the regulation of emotions themselves.

Using the language of feelings also shows how parents cope with particular emotions. In contrast, parents who intellectualize or defend against emotional experiences may be encouraging children to bottle up their feelings.

**Encourage children to talk freely about feelings**

We are trying to teach control over behavior, not feelings. Be sure children understand that while it is not always OK to act on our feelings, it is always OK to talk about them, and that all feelings are normal and natural.

Avoid saying, "Don't be sad," or "You shouldn't be angry about that." Instead, label the child's feelings accurately and encourage the child to talk about the emotion. As the child tells about her experience, listen carefully without judging or giving advice. Sometimes it helps to share a similar past experience.

Children also need to understand that, just as one person likes broccoli and another doesn't, people may have different feelings about the same event and may even have more than one feeling at a time. The crucial lesson is that all feelings are OK — some are comfortable and nice inside while others hurt, but they are all real and important.

**Model emotional regulation**

How do you handle your own emotions? Do you fly off the handle, or withdraw in sullen protest? Your children are likely to imitate your example. Talk about your emotions and your strategies for coping.

For example, if you are getting frustrated trying to repair the lawnmower, instead of exploding in a torrent of swear words, you might say, "I better stop and calm down and relax a little before I continue. I'm so frustrated that I seem to be making things worse; maybe if I get away from it for awhile I'll figure out what I need to do."

Also stay calm during your child's emotional outbursts. Try to offer calm and soothing words of advice and perhaps even stroke the child's arm or back. With such coaching, the child may calm herself enough to be able to state how she is feeling.

**Teach positive self-talk**

Often underlying thoughts intensify, or even

cause, negative emotions such as anger, frustration, fear or discouragement. These thoughts are known as "self-talk," although children may express them aloud. For example, a child who is feeling discouraged may say to you or to himself, "I'm just a failure" or "I can't do anything right," or "I hate you."

Research indicates that children who have negative self-talk get angry more easily than children with positive self-talk. Teach your children to tell themselves quietly thoughts that calm them down, help them gain control over, or put the situation in perspective.

For example, a child who's being teased can stay calm by thinking to himself, "I can handle it, I will just ignore him. It is not worth getting upset about. I am strong."

Examples of positive self-talk include:

- "I'm not going to let it get to me."
- "I've got other friends who like me."
- He didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident."
- "With more practice, I'll get it."

**Identify tough situations and use them to teach problem-solving**

Often children resort to emotional outbursts because they haven't learned strategies for getting what they want. These are the fundamentals of problem-solving.

The basic idea is to teach your child to generate several possible solutions to a problem. When he has an idea, be encouraging and ask for another. When you are convinced that he has come up with as many solutions as he can, you can offer other possibilities.

Next, ask him to think about the consequences of each solution. For example, you can help him to understand that if he hits his sister to get his bike back, he might get himself in worse trouble. Finally, reinforce his thinking and problem-solving efforts with praise.

Practicing how to handle hypothetical situations that normally make them angry helps chil-

dren learn to control their anger in the future. Role play around situations that typically provoke emotional outbursts, and break the problem-solving process into these five steps:

1. Define: What is the problem and how am I feeling in this situation?
2. Brainstorm solutions: What could I do about it (no matter how farfetched)?
3. Evaluate possible solutions: What would happen if I did this?
4. Implement: Am I doing what I decided to do?
5. Evaluate results: How did it turn out?

Another strategy to teach problem-solving is to review a problem that has recently occurred, label the emotions involved, and go over how your child might have handled the situation in a different way. Do not blame or criticize; focus instead on helping your child identify what he felt in the situation and to think of effective ways to manage his feelings and face the problem in the future.

### Teach the "turtle technique"

Positive self-talk and problem-solving strategies help children learn emotional regulation on the cognitive, or thinking, level. But sometimes they need help dealing with the neurophysiological/biochemical aspects of emotional arousal. For example, some children — or all children in some situations — become so agitated that they have no control over their self-talk and cannot do the necessary problem-solving. Learning positive self-talk will relieve some of this over-arousal, but the child may need additional suggestions for calming down first.

The "turtle technique" is an effective way to calm down and a good first step before problem-solving.

First ask the child to imagine she has a shell, like a turtle, that she can retreat into. Next teach how to go into the shell, take three deep breaths, and say to herself, "Stop, take a deep breath, calm down." As she takes these slow deep breaths, she is asked to focus on her breathing and to push the air into her arms and legs so she can relax her muscles. Sometimes it helps to picture a particularly relaxing scene.

As the child continues this slow breathing she is coached to say to herself, "I can calm down. I can do it. I can control it. I can stay out of fights." She can stay in her shell until she feels calm enough to come out and try again.

Model this "turtle technique" for your children. Say you're all in the car, waiting for some-

one to move out of a parking spot. Suddenly, someone else darts in and takes the spot. You say, "I am so mad at him! I was waiting first! Oh well, better go into my shell for awhile and calm down. Guess I better use my turtle power and take some deep breaths. . . Well, I feel better. Let's start looking for parking again."

### Help children recognize stages in the build up of tension

The first "early warning" stage of anger or negative emotion is familiar to every parent. The child grumbles, looks grouchy, sulks around the house. In the second stage, the child becomes increasingly tense, restless and moody; no matter what you suggest, nothing seems to satisfy or interest him. An explosive outburst may occur at the slightest provocation. The child usually resists parental efforts at control at this outburst stage and they may increase his opposition to anything the parent says.

In the third stage, after the tantrum subsides, depression replaces aggression; it is the "leave me alone" stage. The child is sad or placid and does not want to interact with his parents. In the fourth and final stage the child is ready to resume normal activities and may act as if nothing had happened.

Intervene with suggestions of "turtle technique" or calming self-talk in the first stage. Often children do not realize they are becoming angry or frustrated and therefore don't voice these feelings until they emerge in a full-blown tantrum. In this early warning stage, encourage children to talk about feelings and express their frustrations in socially acceptable ways.

If your child has difficulty expressing herself, you might try to put into words what you suspect the child is thinking and feeling. Parental understanding and concern can go a long way toward reducing build up of negative feelings at this stage.

It's also possible to intervene in the fourth stage, after the incident is over. At this point, the parent can lead the child through problem-solving and discussing what happened and how the child might handle it differently next time. Include how you and the child each felt about the episode, the causes and early warning signals, and alternative ways to solve the problem in the future.

### Teach appropriate expression of negative feelings

As mentioned earlier, children need to know

that all feelings are OK — anger, anxiety, sadness and other negative feelings are unavoidable and normal — but that there are different ways of expressing those feelings, and that they have a choice in how they react. Children should be taught to put their negative feelings into words that are assertive but not hostile. We can help them learn the difference between sticking up for their rights and attempting to hurt someone else, and praise them when they express difficult emotions in appropriate ways.

### Praise efforts to regulate their emotions

Be sure to praise children for handling frustration without losing control of their anger. Research has shown that aggressive and impulsive children receive more critical feedback, negative commands and less praise than other children — even when they are behaving appropriately. However, they need positive feedback even more than normal children, for even when praise does occur, they are likely not to notice or process it. This means you will have to work extra hard to double your praises by finding all the positive behaviors you can to reinforce.

It is particularly important to try to praise behaviors involving self-control and persistence, appropriate expression of feelings (positive or negative) and control of emotional outbursts. Reinforce any calm, purposeful activities following a disappointment or frustrating event. For instance, you might say, "That was great. You calmed yourself down," or "That was cool. You were patient and kept trying even though you were getting frustrated with that difficult mathematics assignment."

You can also teach them to reinforce themselves. Teach them to praise themselves through positive self-talk such as "I did a good job" or "I was patient with myself and it paid off in the end."

### Alter child's self-image and paint a positive future

Have the child begin to perceive herself as someone who is becoming successful at handling emotions. You can predict your child's success by saying such things as, "You are becoming a person who can really control your anger well. You are very strong inside." ■

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