

Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet



Emotional regulation, simply put is a person's ability to effectively manage and respond to an emotional experience.

Emotional awareness is having a knowledge and understanding of emotions, what they feel and look like, and why we are experiencing them.

Why are emotional awareness and regulation important for young people to develop?

- Emotional regulation and the ability to respond appropriately to problems and in times of stress will equip young people for their adult life, in work, in social and personal relationships. Learning and developing skills and strategies to become emotionally more aware and cope with self-regulation will lay the foundations for future success, happiness and better mental health and well-being.
- An Autistic young person can struggle with both emotional awareness and emotional regulation.
- When an Autistic young person is unable to regulate, understand or express their emotions this can lead to them feeling overwhelmed, feeling out of control, feeling lost or reacting in an unanticipated way. They may be perceived as being rude or abrupt. In addition, they may not realise the impact their emotions and emotional responses have on others.
- When young people are not coping with the emotions they are feeling or not able to regulate this can be expressed through externalising (meltdown) or internalising (shutdown) behaviours. Externalising are the big loud behaviours that are easily identifiable, shouting, running away etc. but the internalising behaviours may not be so obvious, this may be sitting quietly, withdrawing from interactions.

Why does an Autistic young person struggle with emotional regulation?

Some difficulties that an Autistic young person experience can give rise to many experiences that may make it difficult to regulate emotions:

- They may struggle to understand a situation from the perspective of others.
- They may struggle to read social cues or understand social rules.



Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet

- They may struggle with social imagination which makes it difficult to predict what will happen in social situations, or what another person may do.
- They may struggle greatly with changes or with transitioning from task to task, or place to place.
- They may struggle to cope with things that are un-familiar or new.
- May become overwhelmed by sensory stimuli.
- Can be rigid in their thinking and can struggle to accept new ideas or correct/edit their own work.
- They may get stuck in the detail of a task and not be able to see the bigger picture.
- Rigidity of thought may lead to conflict with others, for example when playing games with altered rules.
- They may not express or communicate the emotions their feeling to others, for example through expected facial expressions or body language, in addition to not being able or confident enough to verbally describe or explain.
- They may struggle with theory of mind, which may lead them to presume or expect that you know what they are feeling or experiencing.

All of the above and many more could lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, fear, anger, and loneliness.

Emotional Awareness

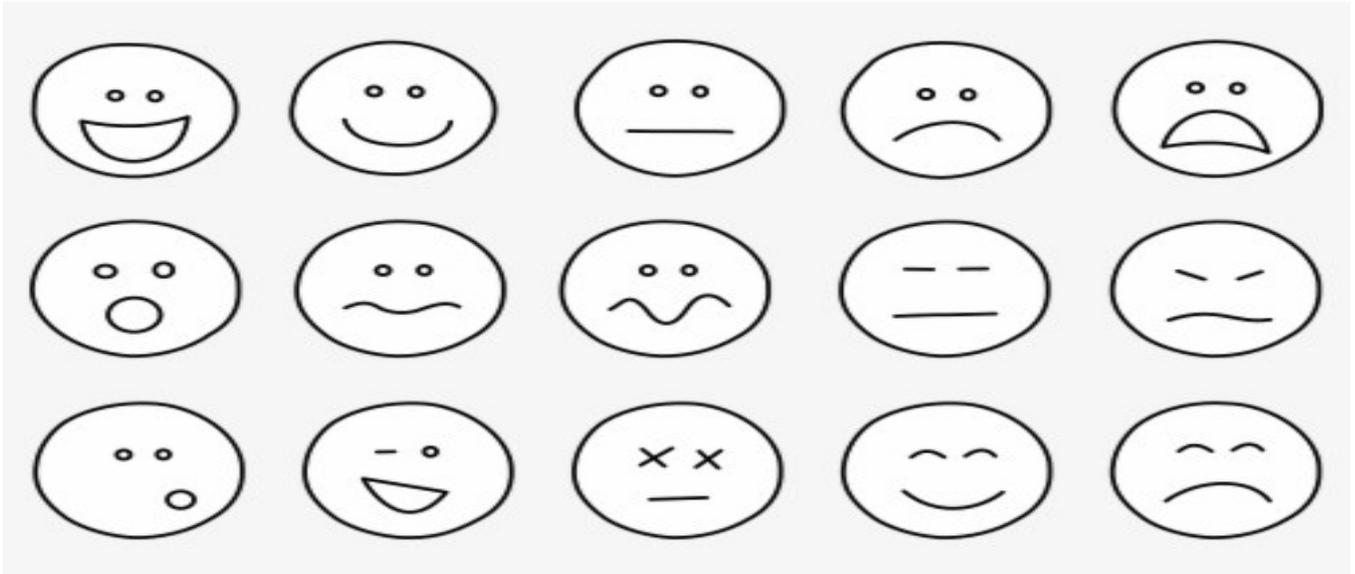
- As mentioned previously, an Autistic young person can struggle with emotional awareness, this can include knowing the difference between emotions, knowing what emotions feel like when they are experiencing them or knowing the name of the emotion that they are feeling.
- They can also misinterpret the emotions of others, for example perceiving someone is angry when they are actually excited. If an individual does not know what they or others are feeling it is very difficult to know how to respond; this in its self can cause anxiety and fear.



Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet

- Learning about emotions, what they look like, what they feel like, when they occur will all help the young person develop knowledge and understanding of themselves and others.



Activities to support emotional awareness and learning

- When reading stories highlight what emotions the characters may be feeling, explaining how you might know, for example their body language, facial expressions or behaviours.
- Use pictures and visuals to show facial expressions linked to emotions, point out the key features, for example how a mouth might look when we are happy.
- Watch TV or film clips showing what emotions look like and how they are expressed and discuss the key features seen.
- Role play games acting out different emotions, the use of puppets or toys may also be considered.
- Games or activities that incorporate visuals of people expressing emotions, for example matching facial expressions to the emotions, or for older children matching scenarios to emotions.
- Having a mirror to see their own expressions and see if they can make different facial expressions to match given emotions.
- Having handy visuals readily available, for example an emotion fan, so the child can be supported to identify their own and the emotions of others as they are happening. For example a child in the class is excited, a support adult could point out the emotion using the visual and name it.
- Regular naming of emotions or how you are feeling will help the young person identify emotions in addition to learning that emotions are being felt by others all of the time. For



Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet

example, when a teacher tells a class they they are impressed with how the class sat and listened to the story so nicely, it could also be added how happy and proud it made them feel.

- Consider ELSA sessions for emotional learning and awareness.

For younger children it is best to stick to the basic core emotions, happy, sad, scared and angry. As a child matures it may be appropriate to expand the emotional vocabulary, adding words like worried, fearful, joy, excited or furious. Then there may be the point to introduce more complex concepts like jealousy, pride, guilt or remorsefulness.

Strategies to support emotional regulation

Supporting children to be more self-aware of their emotional state is a good starting point, using a tool like the 5 point scale can help a young person identify what they are feeling at a point in time, but it is also a useful tool when reflecting with a young person after an event has happened.

5 Point Scale

5

I can't stand this and ready to explode.

I want to hit someone, something, or throw something. I need an adult to help me go to a safe place so I can calm down.



4

I am getting too angry.

My brain isn't working clearly. I might say or do something I will be sorry for later. I need to go to my safe place to calm down.



3

I am getting really irritated.

I need to walk away from a bad situation. I will tell my teacher that I need a break.



2

I am doing OK.

I'm not pleased, but I'm not upset. I can stay where I am and keep working. I can control my anger by myself.



1

I am doing great.

I feel good about myself and about what is going on around me.



Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet

- It is important to recognise that for an Autistic young person it may not be a single event or one particular trigger that causes them to move to a point of being emotionally dysregulated, it may be a combination or a build-up over a period time of a number of factors.
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- Their state of being noticeably upset or frustrated may actually be when they have reached 5 on the 5- point scale. However, they may have been struggling for a period of time prior to this, and have been unable to verbalise this, know how to or feel empowered to take action to calm themselves.
- Giving the young person planned strategies in advance will not only increase their own ability to take action to calm, but also empower them to do so.
- Spending time making a plan of strategies with a young person when they are in a calm state will help them feel confident and more able to regulate their feelings. Their agreement and involvement when developing a plan is important because they need to agree that the strategies will be helpful for them, so are more likely to use them.
- The 5 - point scale (The Incredible 5 Point Scale, Kari Dunn Buron) can be used with a young person when planning and supporting them to learn strategies. For example, supporting the young person to recognise what level 3 may feel like, what they notice about themselves when they are feeling around the level 3, what they could do when they are reaching this level.
- Other scales are available and may be more suitable to use for younger children, or to match the level of comprehension of the young person. Feelings Thermometer, Traffic Light Toolkit, Zones of Regulation. A great many resources are available online for free.
- An example plan using the 5 point scale may be, (although when devised with a child, visuals or pictures may be more appropriate to be used in the plan):
 - When I am at **level 1**, I am calm, I am managing well with the task/activity I am doing, and I am going to continue.
 - When I am at a **level 2**, I could use a prearranged signal to the Teaching Assistant that I am struggling a little, but I am managing, and I can carry on with the task/activity I am doing. I may get up from my chair without asking to have a drink from my water bottle to help me stay calm.
 - When I am a **level 3**, I might need to stop the activity I am doing and move to a place of quiet, that place is '.....', I do not need to wait to ask my adults to go to this place, I agree that I will go to this place and nowhere else because the adults



Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet

know I am safe there and can come and help me. Or, I may choose to stop the activity/task and use my fiddle toy as a distraction to help me calm, I do not have to ask the adults to do this. Or, I can stop the activity/task and sit and do my quiet breathing exercises.

- When I am at **level 4**, I will wait at my quiet safe place which is '.....' when the adult comes to check on me I will ask for a movement break outside, so I can get some cool fresh air.
- When I feel at **level 5**, I will remain in my quiet safe place which is '.....', I can use the 'I need time' sign (a pre-printed visual, stored in the safe place) to tell the adult that I don't want to talk and I don't want them to talk to me just now, I need silence and alone time. I know the adult may stay close to make sure if I need help they are there and to make sure I am safe.

More suggestions for strategies and support

- Young person could make a calm box (sometimes called a happy box) they can put items that make them feel secure, happy or help them to calm. Items could include a photograph of their pet, a small toy or game, maybe a bubble timer.
- There is easy access to fiddle or fidget toys in the classroom environment, so they don't need to ask to get one.
- Young people need the adults around them to be calm and accepting, a low arousal approach. It may be, depending on what the young person is feeling in that moment, that they need those offering support to be quiet and not talk to them at all, but to stay close so they are aware that you are there when they are ready.
- The young person is supported and encouraged to discuss/ask questions about situations they have seen involving others expressing emotions.
- Communicate clearly with the young person, say what you mean or actually want from them, as they may not be able to interpret from your body language/facial expressions.
- Help the young person by trying to identify particular times of difficulty, for example break times. Do they need a buddy for these times? Or is there an adult play leader that they could be given the job of helping them?



Emotional Regulation

Advice Sheet

- Use comic strip conversation to help analyse a situation after it has happened, this may help increase their learning and development about their emotions/actions/thoughts and what others may have felt/thought in the same situation.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations>



- Are there opportunities at school to learn new calming strategies or activities, for example mindfulness, yoga, practise breathing exercises?
- Model calm responses in difficult or challenging situations.
- Role play could be used to practise a situation that is causing anxiety or difficulty. For example practising saying hello to new people and introducing yourself.

Some useful links

<https://www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html>

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/traffic-light-toolkit-for-emotional-regulation/>

<https://copingskillsforkids.com/blog/2016/4/27/making-a-feelings-thermometer>

<https://www.5pointscale.com/>

