

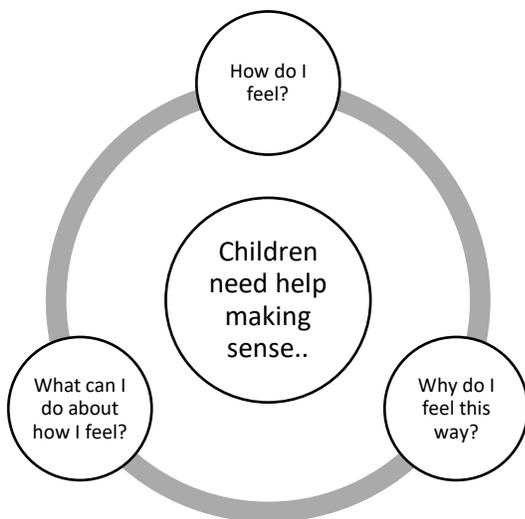
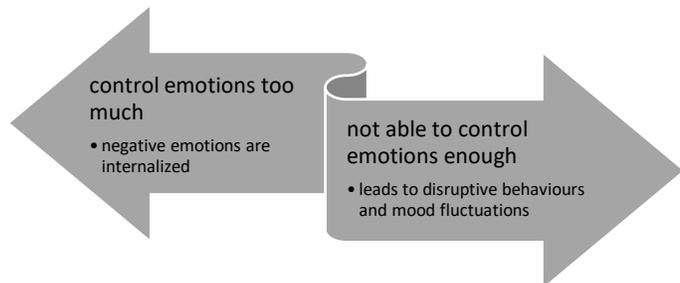
Fostering Healthy Emotion Regulation

Gillespie (2014) states that “emotion regulation is involved in how we feel emotions, how we pay attention to emotions, how we think about these feelings and how we behave – from our physiological reactions (e.g., increased heart rate) to our purposeful coping behaviours”.

These processes are integral in how a child comes to feel about

- Herself,
- her relationships with others,
- her ability to cope in the face of frustration, disappointment, stress and uncertainty, and
- her mental health.

Poor emotion regulation skills are often identified in children and adolescents who are at-risk for psychological problems.



Children cannot regulate their emotions on their own – Adults and teachers are critical in helping children **co-regulate** big emotions. Co-regulation relates to how we communicate with children, the language we use and the way we respond to their difficult emotions; how we play with children; how we model good coping and express our own emotions; how we interpret children’s behaviour and set limits.

Some ways to support the development of healthy emotion regulation skills through co-regulation:

1. **Label emotions: yours, mine, everybody’s!** Adults are encouraged to label their own emotions, those of their child and those in books, on tv, in videogames, etc.
2. **Choose books that will help expand a child’s emotional vocabulary.** Books are particularly helpful in helping explain emotions to children. They may label emotions explicitly or they may provide a great jumping off point for adults to discuss feelings or label the emotions of the characters.
3. **Act like a tour guide.** When you’re on vacation, tour guides do a great job of letting you know where you are going and what to expect. Like vacationers in an unfamiliar place, children are having new experiences all of the time. Similarly, just as they get used to one place or activity, things change. Often we move so quickly from one activity to another that we don’t give children enough warning



about what is coming next. Abrupt changes can lead to meltdowns, especially for young children. Prepare a child for what to expect and notice what works best for a child: some children need more preparation than others.

4. **Don't let a child's emotional chaos cause you to overflow.** Do your best to stay calm when a child is overwhelmed with emotion. As a co-regulator, you need to "contain" the child's emotion, like a big bucket that holds water; this provides the child with a sense of safety and security. If her emotions overwhelm you, she may feel more overwhelmed, which will amplify her difficulties and will cause her to have more trouble calming down.
5. **Model good coping.** Children learn best from the models they see. Find appropriate opportunities to provide a think aloud on how you are feeling and why you are feeling that way. Moreover, talk about what you are going to do about improving the feeling if it's a challenging feeling to have.
6. **Help a child figure out what feelings he has internalized throughout the day.** Once a child has a good emotional vocabulary, you can identify all the different emotions he experiences through his day. Try using the analogy of the container (a box, bucket, or some form of catch-all) that gets filled as a child faces frustration, disappointment or hurt. Using this same analogy, you can talk about how full his feelings container is getting throughout the day. If it's getting too full, it needs to be emptied. Similarly, get him to draw pictures of feelings faces if words are harder to come by.
7. **Notice when and if the feelings container is getting too full.** Let a child express his negative emotions by finding time to dump out the contents of his feelings container. Children often have experienced a number of challenging events – some small and some big – over the course of their day. If the feelings container is close to overflowing, a child will only be able to handle so much before a meltdown or tantrum takes form. As a pro-active step, provide a child with the opportunity to tell you about any negative events that took place, as a way of emptying that container to leave room for the rest of the day. Protect that time with a child from other interruptions, so that a child perceives his emotions and experiences as a priority.
8. **And if that container is getting full or is overflowing, be prepared to "sit in the mud" with a child.** If a child is having a meltdown, or is sharing with you that he is angry or sad or disappointed, we don't want to rush him out of these feelings or negate them. Be careful not to try to sweep away the hard stuff too quickly either by providing quick solutions or by making judgments about the appropriateness of his feelings. This can be perceived as "not caring" or "not understanding" and may heighten his mood or negative behaviour.
9. **Bring attention to good coping by a child.** For example, if a child didn't hit their classmate when faced with frustration, but came to you to ask for help and to tell you how she was feeling instead, this is the time to emphasize how appropriately and prosocially she acted. As adults, we often forget to point out the good behaviours, but we are quick to notice the not-so good ones.

Gillespie, M. (2014, March 3). *10 Ways to Foster Healthy Emotion Regulation*. Retrieved from Boomerang Health: <http://www.boomeranghealth.com/blog/psychology/10-ways-foster-healthy-emotion-regulation/>

