Self-Regulation

HealthySteps®
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Self-regulation is when you can notice that your emotions are building up too much and are able to calm down before doing something you regret. Babies and toddlers are not yet able to do this. They cannot stop themselves from acting on their impulses, and this ability, to notice and regulate their emotions and behavior, comes later. Young children learn to do this slowly with support from an adult. The adult needs to be calm in order to guide the child. This can be tricky since it's so easy to react, and overreact, to a young child's behavior (see Challenging Behaviors article).

When a child has big negative emotions that likely means they are no longer able to cope. They can't learn anything in that state, but you may be able to help them calm down. The start of self-regulation is always *co-regulation*. When you are calm, you can help your child become more regulated, so they can return to learning.

Some things that will help:

Have realistic expectations. Young children have a hard time when they have big feelings. They are not yet able to:

- Remember all the rules all the time.
- Fully understand the results of their actions.
- Stop themselves from doing something, even if they know it's not allowed.

Stay calm, yourself. The part of the brain that allows one to "get calm" isn't yet wired in young children. They need their caregivers to use their adult brains to regulate and set a good example. It helps you regulate to:

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- Recognize when you're starting to get upset or irritated.
- Remember that your child needs you to stay calm in order to help.
- Take a few deep breaths before responding (as long as everyone is safe).

Set clear limits. Limits and rules need to be stated clearly and often. Be consistent. Remember that it will take time for them to learn rules and follow expectations.

Use words and actions to set limits. (See Limit Setting article.) Sometimes words alone are not enough. Use a calm, low voice, and shake your head. Or try a "stop" or "no-no" hand movement along with your words. Hearing words together with actions will help your child follow directions more regularly.

Be patient. Things must be repeated for young children to learn. Sometimes the thing that works is time and trust that your child will get there eventually.

Recognize your child's wants and feelings. Use words to tell your child that you understand what they want. Say, "You want another cookie, but I said only one, and that makes you mad/sad." Empathize and validate their feelings. Note that sometimes the choices they are being offered are not the ones they want.

Take a break. Sometimes trying to soothe a child only makes it worse. At these times, a break can help them calm down. Don't treat the break as a punishment (see Time-In & Time-Out article), but rather as time to help them catch their breath.

Help your child learn to self-soothe. Helping your child calm down is not giving in or spoiling them. It teaches the important skill of self-soothing. Sometimes young children can be soothed by being held closely, or rocked, as they need this kind of touch and body contact to relax. Some children need to jump up and down to vent their energy.

Staying calm and regulated is hard to do! However, for your child to learn, they need to see you doing it. Reach out to your HealthySteps Specialist if you need support.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

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