



Emotional Regulation: Strategies to Use and Skills to Teach

What to do: Review this information about emotional regulation and dysregulation. Consider how this information might help the next time a student exhibits behavior that may signal a problem with emotional regulation.

Why it matters: Intense behavior can be disruptive, unsettling, and stressful for everyone involved. Understanding emotional dysregulation — and having a plan to use and teach emotional regulation strategies — can help you mediate potentially negative effects in your program environment and in your students' lives.

Emotional regulation is *the ability to manage and express emotions in appropriate ways*. Although emotional regulation skills can be taught, some people find these skills harder to master than others, for a variety of reasons. Several factors are involved, including biological factors, personality traits, mental health conditions, environmental conditions such as adverse childhood experiences and chronic stress, and lack of opportunities for practice and support. When regulation skills haven't been mastered, people may exhibit *emotional dysregulation*. This condition can lead to mood swings or emotional responses that are disproportionate or inappropriate to the situation. Many people may think of toddlers and the “terrible twos” as the prime examples of emotional dysregulation. But some people continue to struggle with emotional regulation throughout their lives, especially people who've experienced trauma and abuse.

Signs of Emotional Dysregulation

It's easy to mistake emotional dysregulation for willful misbehavior, so think twice about how to respond when an emotional outburst disrupts an activity. These examples of behaviors may signal emotional dysregulation:

Overly intense emotions



Lack of impulse control



Lack of emotional awareness



Low self-esteem



Trouble making decisions



Inability to manage behavior



Avoids difficult emotions



Trouble managing relationships



How to Proactively Manage Dysregulation

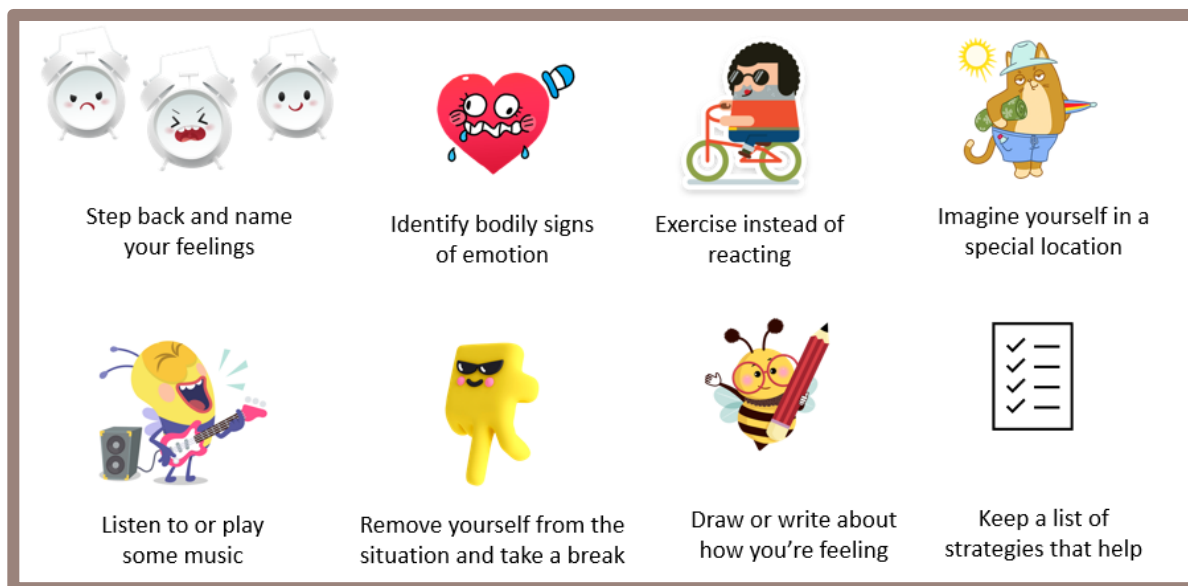
Most strategies for managing occurrences of emotional dysregulation will look familiar because they're ones we use to address misbehavior, too:

- **Establish behavioral expectations and norms.** These should be student generated and posted in a highly visible location. Revisit these as situations arise or as routine reminders.
- **Model healthy but authentic emotional responses to stress.** Let students know that everyone has a variety of stressors to deal with, and talk openly about ways to cope with stress.
- **Hold daily meetings that include emotional check-ins.** The check-in can be as simple as one word, but it gives staff a heads-up about students who may need additional support that day.
- **Maintain consistent routines.** Knowing what to do, how to do it, and what comes next reduces anxiety for students. Predictability and consistency help them feel secure.
- **Reward positive behavior.** Being acknowledged for appropriate behavior can motivate students to choose that behavior again.
- **Implement restorative practices.** Restorative practices can help people process emotions, identify and evaluate the impacts of behavior, foster empathy, assume accountability, and practice compassion. These practices acknowledge and honor the dignity of each person in the school or program community, strengthen relationships, and help educators prevent and address misbehavior. Implementing restorative practices effectively requires training, practice, and concerted effort over time.
- **Allow students to take a break.** In addition to scheduled breaks, students may sometimes need a break if they feel emotions building or begin to feel overwhelmed. Create a quiet, safe space where they can remove themselves from the stressful stimulation and try to regulate their emotions before things boil over.
- **Be prepared to monitor and adjust.** If a certain situation or activity is a trigger for a student, find ways to adjust without disrupting everyone else. For example, you might make an alternate activity available or give the student a choice.
- **Be aware of and use appropriate de-escalation strategies as needed.** Don't overreact. Communicate clearly in a calm tone of voice. Use neutral body language and facial expressions. Respect their personal space. Acknowledge their emotions.
- **Collaborate with school-day staff, including teachers and counselors.** Strategies for addressing and responding to undesirable behavior should be consistent across settings to increase their effectiveness.
- **Have a plan in place to communicate with parents.** Some students live in situations where they witness emotional dysregulation in one or more adults. Be aware of this, and of the legalities and district policies related to parent communication. Work with school-day staff to be aware of the most effective methods of communication so students don't experience additional trauma.



Emotional Regulation Skills

Developing emotional regulation skills is a worthwhile goal. We can all improve the way we handle our emotions. This chart shows strategies that are easy to teach and use. Also, they're easy for students to put into practice without calling attention to themselves.



Resources

Want to know more about dysregulation? Use these resources:

- National Institute of Mental Health (NAMI). (n.d.) [*Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder: The Basics*](#). This fact sheet describes the symptoms of disruptive mood dysregulation disorder and provides tips for parents and caregivers.
- Verywellmind. (2023). [*How to Deal With Dysregulation*](#). This article describes emotional dysregulation and potential causes, impacts, and strategies for supporting children who struggle to regulate their emotions.
- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports. (2022). [*Supporting and Responding to Students' Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs: Evidence-Based Practices for Educators*](#). This practice guide summarizes evidence-based practices.
- Understood for All, Inc. (n.d.). [*Understanding Behavior as Communication: A Teacher's Guide*](#). This article describes four functions of behavior (escape, attention, tangible gains, and sensory needs). It gives examples and links to information about functional behavior assessments.

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