

# Calm <sup>and in</sup> Control

Simple and Effective Strategies  
to Support Young Children's Self-Regulation



**Julie Tourigny, OTD, MS, OTR/L**

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## Dedication

To my children, Ian, Teddy, and Josie, who have encouraged me through this project with their enthusiasm and endless curiosity.

And to my husband, David, for always believing in and being there for me.

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

Hello, early childhood educators! Do you have children who just can't seem to manage their emotions? Who can't seem to sit still? Who'd rather get a laugh from a classmate than pay attention? These children may be struggling with self-regulation. This book is designed to provide simple yet effective sensory strategies and activities to help you teach your children how to regulate their emotions and behaviors during the school day.

*Self-regulation* is the ability to remain calm and in control of our thoughts, actions, and emotions in response to an external event or stimulus. It helps us stay on task and focus on what is relevant. It helps us control our impulses and body movements, no matter how excited, angry, or upset we become. It helps us match our behavior and social interactions to the situation. The better we are at self-regulation, the more successful we will be at life's tasks.

As adults, our ability to self-regulate supports us throughout the day. When completing tasks such as running errands or keeping the house clean, we are using self-regulation so we can engage in activities we need to do instead of activities we would likely prefer to do. Remaining calm after someone cuts us off on the highway or slips into a parking spot we were about to take also demonstrates self-regulation skills.

Self-regulation is not something we are born with. It is a skill we learn and improve upon over time. Most children learn to self-regulate between the ages of three and seven (Montroy et al., 2016). Before this, infants and toddlers rely on co-regulation. *Co-regulation* refers to the nurturing interactions young children have with familiar adults who provide the support, modeling, and training they need to "understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Murray, Rosanbaum, Christopoulos, and Hamoudi, 2015). These supportive interactions promote the development of strong self-regulation skills.



As with many skills, young children will demonstrate a wide range of self-regulation abilities. Preschool, kindergarten, and even first-grade children require support to develop these skills. Some children need help recognizing that something is upsetting or overly exciting. Others may have difficulty knowing how to calm down and take control of their emotions or behaviors on their own.

In the classroom, children with emerging or poorly developed self-regulation may struggle with sustained attention, impulse control, and social interactions. Consider these examples.

Jeffrey, a five-year-old kindergarten student, sits down with his classmates for lunch. He's already eaten his favorite things from his lunch box during snack time. The remaining foods are healthy choices that do not interest him. When a peer pulls a treat from his lunch box, Jeffrey demands that he share the snack. The peer says no and starts to open the snack, but Jeffrey grabs and smashes it. The peer seeks out an adult for support, describing what just happened. Jeffrey begins to yell and cry, saying, "He wouldn't share with me!" Jeffrey exhibits poor self-regulation that affects his impulse control and social interactions.

During circle time, a four-year-old prekindergartner tells a joke. The whole class and the teacher laugh. To help refocus the class, the teacher claps her hands three times, awaiting the same response from the children. Next, Matteo takes a turn, but instead of sharing, he acts silly, rolling around and saying nonsense words to get the group to laugh again. The teacher tries to shift his attention so he will focus on circle time, but he continues in this manner. Matteo exhibits poor self-regulation that affects his impulse control and his ability to shift from a silly moment back to circle time.

Maya, a kindergartner, has spent most of center time talking with her friend. When her teacher gives the class a five-minute warning, she has yet to start on her project. The teacher gives the class a three-minute warning and then a one-minute warning. Maya ignores these cues and continues to talk. When the teacher tells the class that it is time to clean up and get ready for outdoor recess, Maya becomes upset, saying that

she hasn't finished her project yet. She disrupts the class by refusing to clean up and affects their transition to outdoor recess. Maya exhibits poor self-regulation first when she chooses to ignore her center-time project to socialize with her peers and again when she resists the transition to recess.

## How to Use This Book

There are many sensory strategies that support self-regulation. Providing a nurturing and consistent school environment rich in sensory play and activities helps develop self-regulation skills in all children. *Calm and in Control* describes these sensory strategies, explaining when to implement them and how to create an environment that supports all children as they navigate learning, social interactions, and impulse control throughout the school day. In *Calm and in Control*, I explore techniques to support:

- Turn-taking
- Sharing
- Lining up as a group and coping with not being first in line
- The ability to refrain from blurting out answers
- Freedom from separation anxiety
- The ability to handle transitions
- Regrouping after something funny happens
- Impulse control
- Socially appropriate behavior

Refer to *Calm and in Control* often for ideas on enriching the school day with sensory activities and strategies that prevent disruptive behaviors. The book will help develop self-regulation skills for every student in your classroom.

## Let's get started!



# Chapter 1:

## What Self-Regulation Is and Why It Matters

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### What Is Self-Regulation?

Self-regulation is the ability to remain calm and in control of thoughts, feelings, and actions, especially in response to something that elicits a strong emotion. It is a foundational life skill that affects our interactions, friendships, and overall well-being. Children who are well regulated can control their behaviors and emotions in a variety of situations, even when they feel overwhelmed, angry, frustrated, or overexcited. This allows them to get along with their peers, demonstrate patience while learning how to cooperate with others, manage their negative emotions, and maintain their focus on activities even when challenges arise.

Well-regulated children are better at:

- developing and maintaining friendships;
- learning, remembering, and following classroom rules and routines;
- learning and playing independently;
- problem solving;
- persisting with an activity even when it is frustrating or difficult; and
- performing to the best of their ability in school.

Children who struggle with self-regulation exhibit challenging behaviors that are often disruptive to the entire classroom. They may:

- quit difficult games and activities;
- sabotage activities when they feel frustrated or angry;
- become angry or upset quickly and struggle to calm down on their own;
- disrupt the class with overly silly or impulsive behavior; or
- demand attention from caregivers to help them finish a game or activity.

Children who frequently experience intense emotions that result in withdrawal, tantrums, or overly silly behaviors may be having difficulty regulating themselves. They are unable to cope with their feelings appropriately. Many young children have not learned how to handle the strong emotions they feel in response to new events, foods, or activities. These children may act impulsively, destructively, or aggressively. Their behaviors are a sign that they need support.

## **How Self-Regulation Develops**

Infants and toddlers largely rely on co-regulation with a caregiver to understand the world and manage their emotions. Gradually, they begin to self-regulate as they interact with people and objects. Newborns are almost completely reliant on caregivers to meet their physical and emotional needs for food and comfort, soothing, safety and survival, and transitions from asleep to awake and awake to asleep. Infants co-regulate with caregivers to meet their emotional needs. With time and consistency, they begin to develop self-regulatory behaviors such as waiting to be picked up, to receive a bottle, to have a diaper changed, and to regulate their temperature. They learn to calm and sooth themselves. Toddlers begin to self-regulate some of the time but still rely on co-regulation to manage most of their actions and reactions.

Young children rely less on co-regulation and are able to self-regulate more often. However, they continue to require co-regulation to manage big emotions in new situations. Because this shift from co-regulation to

self-regulation occurs during the toddler and younger childhood years, young children need many opportunities to learn and practice self-regulation. The more they do, the more likely they are to develop strong regulation skills they can rely on throughout their lives.

Older children and teenagers self-regulate most of the time, but co-regulation is still necessary, especially in difficult social situations. By early adulthood, the need for co-regulation has diminished, as individuals rely almost entirely on self-regulation skills to think, act, and react.

Young adults should be able to self-regulate almost all the time. However, throughout one's lifespan, people rely on co-regulation to work through difficult social and emotional situations.

## **The Range of Self-Regulation Skills in Early Childhood**

As self-regulation increases, the need for co-regulation decreases. The time at which this shift occurs will differ from child to child based on temperament, home life, stressors, and prior experiences. Some children will enter preschool or kindergarten with limited self-regulation skills; others will have no difficulty remaining calm and in control throughout the school day.

Depending on their early experiences with co-regulation, young children exhibit a wide range of regulation abilities when negotiating conflict, taking turns, sharing limited resources, and talking respectfully to peers and teachers. For example, children without siblings may have fewer opportunities to work on social skills at home. They may lack any understanding of social norms and will push, bite, and steal toys to get what they want. Some children will react to new situations fearfully, refusing to engage, crying, or having a tantrum. Other children may have no tolerance for frustration when an activity is difficult for them. They will become overly upset with themselves or the activity itself, breaking and throwing things.

Although each of these behaviors can be challenging for caregivers, they are normal in young children. The good news is that children have the ability to:

- learn strategies for remaining calm and in control of their feelings;
- replace challenging behaviors with adaptive ones; and
- interact with their peers in socially acceptable ways.

## **Teaching Self-Regulation in the Classroom**

Often, one or two children who exhibit challenging behaviors, such as tantrums, blurting, fidgeting, withdrawal, shyness, or an inability to follow directions, can dictate the energy and overall mood of a classroom. Behaviors such as these are disruptive and distracting to the entire class. When teachers react to these behaviors with punishment, the child receives attention, albeit negative, which may reinforce the negative behavior instead of diminishing it.

To help children learn more adaptive ways to manage their feelings, actions, and reactions, create a nurturing environment marked by:

- Consistent classroom rules and routines
- Opportunities to learn about feelings
- Modeling of self-regulation skills
- Practice of self-regulation skills through open-ended sensory play

In a classroom environment where self-regulation is seen as a skill that needs to be discussed and developed, children can learn appropriate and adaptive responses to difficult feelings or social situations. Each time they experience strong emotions, they will have new tools to maintain a calm demeanor and remain in control of their reactions.

## Consistent Classroom Routines and Rules

When establishing classroom rules, discuss the rules of the class as a group. Give examples of what following the rules looks like, and allow the children to ask questions. Discuss disruptive behaviors, and give examples of what those might look like. Post visual aids that depict the rules throughout the classroom, and teach nonverbal cues to help redirect children. Include the children in the development of any additional rules.

A consistent classroom schedule and routine creates an environment that promotes self-regulation skills. When children know what to expect out of their day, they tend to be calmer and more in control of their emotions. For example, when the morning routine begins with free play, followed by circle time, then snack, followed by outdoor recess, children understand what they should be doing and what they will be doing next. This predictability provides them with a sense of control, which makes transitions go smoothly, and decreases disruptive behaviors.

Consistent classroom routines also exist within activities. When children arrive at school, they sign in, place their jackets and backpacks in their cubbies, and wash their hands. During morning circle time, establish a routine such as the following:

- Teacher greets the class
- Teacher talks about the class schedule and reminds children of the classroom rules
- Children share something with the class
- Teacher reads a book

During afternoon circle time, establish a routine such as the following:

- Teacher discusses positive things she observed during the school day
- Children share positive things they observed
- Teacher reads a book



Although the circle-time routine should remain relatively the same each day, the length of time may vary. Be careful not to run circle time for too long. To make the most of this important time of the school day, plan to spend five to fifteen minutes engaged in a combination of passive and active learning activities. Depending on the age of the children and their attention span each day, circle time could vary in length, but it should last only as long as the majority of children are engaged. There will be days when the class is having difficulty paying attention and circle time will end early. And there may be days when the class remains actively engaged and circle time may extend beyond fifteen minutes.

## Teaching Children to Identify Feelings

Often, young children's strong feelings are invalidated by caregivers, who may mean well. Children may hear statements such as, "Stop crying," "There's no reason to be so mad," or "Calm down." These reactive statements do little to stop children from feeling the way they do in the moment and do not prevent them from feeling this way again in the future. While children may recognize that caregivers disapprove of their behaviors, they will continue to get mad, cry, and act out if they lack the tools to replace those behaviors with an adaptive response.

One of the best ways to help children manage their feelings is to teach them how to identify feelings. While they read books, watch shows, and engage in school activities, label and talk about feelings. That way, they will learn to name and understand their feelings, especially strong ones. Then, they can develop a toolbox for replacing big emotional reactions with regulated, calm responses. To nurture these skills, caregivers can substitute:

"I see that you are upset right now," for "Stop crying."

"I can tell that you are mad right now," for "Don't get so angry."

"I see that you are really frustrated," for "Calm down."

Caregivers who use statements such as, “Kayla, I can see that you feel mad because someone took your toy,” validate what children are feeling. Continuing the conversation with suggestions for an adaptive response will help children learn to be well-regulated. For example, an extension of the statement might be, “Kayla, it is okay to feel frustrated that Joey took your toy. It is not okay to hit him or throw things.” This validates how Kayla is feeling and also lets her know that she should not violate the rules of the classroom when she is mad.

Teaching children about the emotions they are experiencing and suggesting appropriate reactions will diminish challenging behaviors over time. Children who have learned about feelings should be encouraged to practice identifying them when they arise and when they encounter them in stories. The purpose of identifying feelings is to develop self-awareness as well as the ability to understand what another person is experiencing. Once children can identify their feelings, they should be encouraged to practice pausing and reflecting on the emotion. This introspection helps them understand why they are feeling a certain way. Then, they are ready to practice adaptive responses.

## **Replacing Dysregulated Responses with Regulated Ones**

Acting out, whether it is avoidance, withdrawal, yelling, fleeing, or being overly silly, is a maladaptive response to a thought or feeling. Children rarely act out for no reason. An important aspect of self-regulation is the ability to be self-aware. When children are self-aware, they are able to recognize how they are feeling and why.

Before learning self-regulation skills, many children react to unfamiliar situations with a fight-or-flight response. This is especially true during times of stress or intense emotions. The response may prevent children from remaining calm and thinking before they act. The frustrated child may push, break or throw things, hide, cry, or refuse to engage in classroom routines. When children experience something new, whether it is a sound, a taste, or how a thing looks, it may cause a big feeling, such as fear, anger, or overexcitement.



# Calm and in Control

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to Support Young Children's Self-Regulation

**Self-regulation isn't something we're born with. It's a skill we learn and improve over time.**

**T**he better we are at self-regulation, the more successful we will be at life's tasks. Most children learn self-regulation—the ability to remain calm and in control of our thoughts, actions, and emotions—between the ages of three and seven.

This book provides simple and effective strategies and activities to help every child in a preschool or kindergarten classroom learn to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Some children may need help recognizing that something is upsetting or overly exciting. Others may have difficulty knowing how to calm down and take control of their emotions or behaviors on their own.

Discover how to create a nurturing and consistent learning environment that supports all children as they navigate learning, social interactions, and impulse control throughout the day. Explore techniques to support:

- Turn-taking
- Sharing
- Lining up as a group and coping with not being first in line
- The ability to refrain from blurting out answers
- Freedom from separation anxiety
- The ability to handle transitions
- Regrouping after something funny happens
- Impulse control
- Socially appropriate behavior

You will find yourself referring to this book often for ideas on enriching the day with sensory play activities and strategies that prevent disruptive behaviors!



Julie Tourigny, OTD, MS, OTR/L, is a certified and licensed pediatric occupational therapist and is the founder and director of the Colorado Center for Pediatric Learning and Development. Over the past two decades, she has worked with hundreds of children, their caregivers, and educators on sensory processing difficulties. She has developed and taught continuing education courses on the treatment of sensory processing disorder around the United States.

  
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