Regulated or Dysregulated: Dealing with Feeling

If you've looked at anything parent-related on TikTok or Instagram in the past year or two, you've heard about emotion regulation. Everyone's stressed (dysregulated) because their kids are having BIG feelings (dysregulated) and it's creating this cycle of emotional challenge for everyone.

But the idea of being dysregulated - and the concept of emotion regulation - isn't a new fad. It's a well-researched phenomenon that, when understood, can help our kids flourish (and us survive).

Emotion Regulation

In simple terms, emotion regulation is how well someone can manage their emotions – whether they're delightful ones like excitement and joy, or challenging and uncomfortable ones like jealousy and anger. If we go a little deeper, emotion regulation is the ability to turn our emotions up *or* down in a way that is appropriate for the context/environment, and that is in line with our values and goals.

That's a lot... so let's talk about what this really means.

There are some times and places where we want to allow our emotions free reign - we can turn them up. In a positive sense, this could be at a birthday party or at the park with friends. Our kids are in a context where it's fun to express joyful emotions and be big and loud about it if that works for them. On the more challenging side of things, expressing anger at injustice might be appropriate. And crying - even sobbing - at a funeral (or even when things don't go the way you'd like) would probably be ok.

Emotion Dysregulation

Things get dysregulated when those emotions (the positive ones or the negative ones) are too big for the place you're in. Anger at being asked to turn off a screen and come to dinner... not so good. It's unhelpful for the context, and it's bad for long-term relationship goals. A meltdown in a shopping centre aisle because you can't have a treat? This isn't going to work well for anyone. Mega-excitement at a party that leads to property being damaged or someone being hurt... again, too much for the context and bad for long-term goals.

How it Develops

Emotional regulation isn't something people are born with. It develops over time, starting around age two and continuing until around age nine or ten. At this age, most kids can regulate their emotions most of the time under most conditions. They're not perfect. Even adults still struggle if they're hungry, tired, or stressed. But this is the age psychology researchers think is a developmentally appropriate time for most kids to pull things together (including neurodiverse kids, although there's some variability here).

Now for the great news. Emotion regulation can be strengthened with instruction and practice.

There are two types of emotional regulation: self-regulation, or managing your own emotions, and co-regulation, which involves helping others manage their emotions.

Becoming More Regulated: Identify Emotions

Learning emotional regulation strategies begins with identifying your feelings and building a vocabulary to describe them. If you can name it, you can tame it. If it's mentionable, it's manageable. The more detailed we can be about the emotion we are feeling, the greater our emotional literacy. And the more granular we can be, the easier it is to regulate our emotions because they make sense. This is *especially* true for children.

Model it

Children learn emotional regulation skills by watching people around them. You can help your children by serving as an "emotional container," naming emotions and modeling how to express them in a healthy way. As an example, in the moment emotional regulation strategies could include breathing, pausing, stepping outside, or doing something as simple as a body scan or grounding technique. These strategies help calm the body's nervous system and turn down the intensity of emotions.

Understanding that emotions are like waves - they rush in (and sometimes wet our towels and bags), and then they recede, only for another wave to rush back in when we're not expecting it. But they always go back out to sea again. You're not feeling the big emotion right now that you were feeling yesterday or this morning. They come and they go. Understanding this makes emotions far less scary or challenging.

We're not trying to avoid or eliminate difficult feelings. That's not realistic. Life is complex and emotions can hit like a tidal wave, even when things are going relatively well. Instead, the goal is to notice those emotions and allow them. Pushing against them usually only creates frustration.

Feelings aren't Facts

One more valuable thing to teach your kids: your emotions are not always accurate reflections of reality. I often teach parents that feelings are not facts. They provide you with information, but then you get to choose how to respond.

Lastly, your child is most likely going to regulate well if you are there to co-regulate with them. Your steady, caring presence during your child's difficult emotion helps them feel understood, see things from a fresh perspective, and respond to their challenges thoughtfully rather than reactively.



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What to Say When Your Child is Dysregulated

Here's a simple script next time your child feels overwhelmed and dysregulated:

1. Make sure *you* are calm when you approach your child
2. Say what you see: "Looks like things are pretty tough for you today?"
3. Give them an easy choice: "Do you want space, or do you want a hug or a chat?"
4. Give them time to process their emotion a little (either with you there or with some space)
5. Problem-solve the situation together.

For healthy long-term emotional regulation skills, practicing matters. You get to practice responding well to their emotions - and modelling your own regulated responses to big emotion moments. And they get to practice regulating by working through those moments with you by their side.

Just like any skill, the more you practice, the better you get at it.



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