

Understanding and supporting emotional self-regulation at school



School resources

Emotional self-regulation is the capacity to control one's emotions. This skill is required to successfully navigate a range of situations in life. In educational contexts, both teachers and students need to be able to emotionally self-regulate in order to engage in meaningful and successful teaching and learning experiences.

The importance of emotional self-regulation for learning

In order for students to engage in the process of learning, their brain has to be in its optimum cognitive state. Engaging the pre-frontal cortex in essential executive functioning skills such as sequencing and retaining information cannot happen until the student's emotional state has been filtered. [This](#) research review explains the role of the emotions in learning in more depth.

Some students find getting their brain to its optimum cognitive state more challenging than others. This is due to a range of factors. For example, students who have experienced developmental [trauma](#) will have neural pathways that are highly susceptible to their environment. The student's brain has been conditioned to be in a permanent stress response. This means that their brain's hypervigilance can result in an accelerated state of arousal and emotional escalation can occur, often over something seemingly very small or insignificant.

Neurodivergent students may also find emotional self-regulation challenging. [Autistic students](#), for example, may experience sensory overload which can affect their brain's ability to engage in learning tasks. Students with [ADHD](#) are likely to experience emotions more intensely than other students¹. This can result in an emotional 'over-reaction' and/or a profoundly negative view of a situation. This is often coupled with low self-esteem as a learner and can be debilitating for the student and their learning experience.

How to support students to maintain a state of emotional self-regulation

Students whose skills are limited in terms of emotional self-regulation will require support from the adults around them. Ideally teachers, teacher aides, and parents will work together to provide this support. In addition to this, there are a range of strategies that adults can use to ensure that students who are in a state of emotional escalation can be effectively supported.

Understanding the process of co-regulation: In order for students to be able to emotionally self-regulate, they first need support through co-regulation from the people around them, particularly adults. This process usually happens from birth but, as with all humans, life experiences will differ. Some students will have had consistency in their developing years, while others will have had this to a lesser degree. Some students will have secure attachments with significant adults in their lives, while others will not be able to form secure (healthy) attachments.

Co-regulation offers the student a calm and consistent approach with positive and effective interactions and actions. It provides a safe space for the student whose brain naturally mirrors this state and, over time, internalises it and is able to draw on it to support their own emotional self-regulation. Without emotional co-regulation, a student will not be able to self-regulate their emotions.

Adults play a vital role in co-regulation and supporting self-regulation. First and foremost, they are responsible for the classroom culture and environment. Adults should also provide relational safety, which is the connection with the student which provides consistency, empathy, respect, and honesty. To facilitate relational safety the adult needs to operate from a place of calm, logic, and reason, which means they need to be able to emotionally self-regulate themselves, to be attuned to their own emotional state, and to recognise that, if they feel their emotions are rising, they need to seek support from another adult. It is the adult's responsibility to ensure they have invested time into getting to know the student, and they need to view the student through the lens of vulnerability – in other words, the student cannot 'help' their behaviour: as one writer puts it, children do well if they can².

Classroom culture, environment, language, and interactions: Teachers and other adults can support students' emotional regulation by creating a positive classroom culture. Teaching students to understand **the language of emotions**, learning **techniques for emotional self-regulation** such as mindfulness, and creating space in the school day to use this language and practise techniques like mindfulness can all help to contribute to a classroom culture that acknowledges and supports emotions.

There are many aspects of the classroom environment that contribute to supporting emotional regulation. Some key ideas include:

- **having a clear structure** to the day with the same things happening at the same time each day (as far as possible)
- **ensuring predictability** by using a visual timetable on both the whiteboard and the student's desk so they know what is coming up
- **supporting transitions** between tasks by ensuring the student has what they need in terms of materials and instructions in place to support their transition to the next learning activity
- **labelling parts of the classroom** to support the student to navigate the physical environment
- **preparing the student for any changes** to the normal classroom routine.

Adults' use of language and their approach to general interactions also contribute to supporting emotional regulation. In particular, using a **calm, even tone** at all times, if possible, and using **consistent language** across all adults who work with the child is beneficial. **Naming emotions** is a powerful tool, and saying things like 'I can see you are feeling...!' or 'I can see you need help with ...!' is far more effective and supportive than blaming the student for their emotional response. Try to **avoid warnings and second chances**, as these tend not to be effective, and remember that less can be more as students often get overwhelmed when it comes to spoken interactions.

Teaching and learning: Teachers can design teaching and learning activities in a way that supports students' emotional self-regulation. **Checking in and connecting** with students at the start and end of the day or lesson, as well as before morning tea and lunch in primary school settings, can support the student's need for co-regulation, as well as providing an opportunity to check for understanding of the curricular content covered in the lesson.

It can be helpful to work backwards by considering what it is that you want the student to achieve, and then determining the steps are needed to achieve this, and how these steps can be supported. Work with the student to **set achievable learning goals** (which may need to be broken down into small steps or mini-goals), and ensure that their family and whānau are on board with these goals. In some cases, this might be part of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. **Be explicit** about what the student should aim to achieve in each learning task, and modify this if needed – the student needs to feel successful. Contextualise the learning for students by explaining 'yesterday we ... and today we will ...',

and **scaffold learning** by giving examples, offering prompts, and so on. A multi-modal approach, such as using appropriate visuals to support text, can be effective for many students. When it comes to pair and group work, think carefully about who the student works with, and facilitate predictability for the student by letting them know in advance who they will be working with and allowing them some input into this.

The importance of the home-school partnership

Students who find emotional self-regulation challenging will need a team of supportive adults around them. This team includes families and whānau. Getting families on board early will often go a long way to reducing the amount of emotional escalation experiences a student has, and students often feel safer when the home-school partnership is robust – a unified and team approach designed to support the student can feel empowering. Families and whānau are a **valuable source of information and insight**, as they know the student best, and may have helpful suggestions to support adults at school, such as what is likely to trigger the student, and what will support their de-escalation. Day-to-day life may be challenging for the student, so getting a snapshot about what happened the night before or what has gone on in the morning before school ensures the adults at school can support the student in the best way possible. For example, the student may need some down time when they get to school, and this can be provided if the parent feels comfortable to advise the school that the student has had a challenging start to the day.

As noted above, families and whānau should also be invited to **attend IEP meetings**. The IEP is an important plan to ensure both the student, their teachers, and the wider school team are clear about goals and how to achieve them. Have the concept of 'success' at the heart of the team – **consider what success looks like** for this student, and how everyone can support them to experience success.

Pre-empting potential triggers

There are a number of common triggers for students who find emotional self-regulation challenging. For most students, these are 'normal' aspects of school life, such as assemblies, having a relief teacher, or going on a school trip. For some students, however, these things can cause them to be emotionally heightened and, potentially, begin to escalate. Being aware of the student's potential triggers can support the adults to put effective strategies in place. Some common potential triggers and appropriate pre-emptive strategies are described below.

Transitions: Any movement from one thing to another can create a sense of unpredictability for the student. A transition can be in the classroom, such as changing between learning tasks, or out of the classroom, such as transitioning from class time to break time, from class time to assembly, or from one class to another. Useful strategies for supporting transitions include:

- checking in with the student prior to the transition
- using a visual timetable (on the whiteboard, on their desk, or both)
- co-constructing a plan for particular events in the school week, such as assembly (for example, can they sit near the door or with their teacher?)
- using a simple check and connect at the start and end of break times, which can set the student up for success and ensures that teachers are aware of their emotional state when they come back from a break time
- providing supports and activities for break times (such as a designated friend to be with, joining a club, or spending time in the school library)

- planning extra-curricular activities thoroughly to ensure the student's needs will be met as much as possible (for example, meeting with the key people on school trips beforehand to brief them on the student).

Relief teachers: Given that the student's need for co-regulation which comes from consistency and a sense of trust, having a relief teacher in the class can be hugely challenging. Some useful strategies for supporting students when a relief teacher will be in class include:

- briefing the relief teacher about the student or ensuring a member of the school leadership team can do this
- sharing the safety/de-escalation plan with the relief teacher and ensure they understand it
- talking to the student (if possible) prior to the relief teacher taking the class, or consider if another trusted adult in the school can do this on the day
- giving the student the details of what will happen on the day (thus removing unpredictability)
- task moderation: appreciate that the school day will be more challenging for the student, so consider giving them alternative tasks which they will enjoy and complete successfully
- getting support from other adults (for example, a trusted senior leader could pop in every hour to see how the student's day is going).

Other people: Adults and peers are often aware of students who find emotional self-regulation challenging, and may have witnessed the student emotionally escalating. Sometimes, other adults in the school or the student's peers may be the trigger for the escalated behaviour. Strategies for working with others to pre-empt triggering a student's escalation include:

- working in partnership with adults in the school and ensuring they understand what is going on for the student – the more information and understanding other adults have, the better
- sharing the plans that are in place for the student with all school personnel
- gathering the student's voice regarding which adults they do and do not feel safe with
- having at least one person in the school senior leadership team with whom the student feels safe
- ensuring the student's peers have an understanding of the student and their needs
- managing the behaviour of students who are actively triggering the student
- pre-planning groups for group work to ensure this is going to provide a safe and nurturing experience for the student.

What to do if a student begins to emotionally escalate

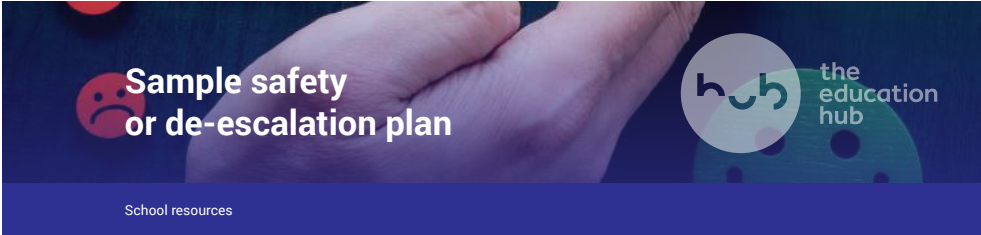
Really knowing and understanding a student's needs means being aware of their emotional state, and strategies to support a student's emotional self-regulation can be very effective. However, there are times when, for a variety of reasons, a student will not be able to remain in a regulated emotional state and pre-emptive strategies will not be effective.

For students who are particularly vulnerable, a safety or de-escalation plan may be needed. The purpose of such a plan is to:

- create a process to follow which is clear and consistent, and in the best interest of the student
- ensure the safety of the student, peers, and adults

- co-construct (with the student) what their triggers are, how this is likely to present (look), and what can be done to try to minimise the student's emotional escalation
- provide all adults with the same information
- detail specific information such as who the teacher should call for if the student is escalating and what the process for this is.

A sample de-escalation plan is provided below, or click [here](#) to access a template to use in your own setting.



School resources

Name:		Room:	
Date:		Year:	

Narrative:

X is a 10-year-old boy who has been diagnosed with autism. He is generally quite placid and happy, although in some social situations he can become very agitated. This is particularly evident when working with particular students and while playing small group games.

Strengths and interests:


Klikko and LEGO
Minecraft
Decodable texts
Card games
Has started enjoying playing bob tag outside

Goal: Manage emotions to keep himself, teacher, and peers safe

Nature of potential risk:

If teacher intervention is not effective and timely, X's behaviour can escalate to a point where he can become physical with others. This can also include tipping over classroom furniture and throwing objects.

<p>Triggers/antecedents:</p> <p>Particular peers (see class teacher, LSC/SLT).</p> <p>While playing games in break times (e.g. Exploding Kittens) Feels like others may be cheating. He also finds it hard to lose at times.</p> <p>During writing time in class.</p> <p>Transitions to other spaces at school.</p>	<p>Prevention strategies:</p> <p>Strategic grouping & people, and things to play with during breaks.</p> <p>Explicit teaching/reminder of rules prior to starting game, preparing him to cope with game outcomes.</p> <p>Visual timetable, when and then, support from LSA, scaffolding with high interest pictures and graphic organisers.</p> <p>Identify and validate feelings when moving to other spaces. Gather X's voice around what would support him. Potential ideas – take a squish toy, wear headphones, and pre-empt with visual timetable.</p>
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Safety or de-escalation plan Page 2		
Emotional & engagement level:	Signs and symptoms of emotional state:	Staff response:
X is in a calm space and is ready to engage with learning	Engagement, smiling, laughing, and talks animatedly	<p>Goal: to maintain regulation through connection, curriculum adaptation, and realistic expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predictable routine and boundaries • Clear, short instructions and then allowing time for compliance • Structure and consistency • Firm, fair expectations • Positive recognition for appropriate behaviours • Break down task or request into small manageable steps and give time frame to check back in • Give him agency by offering choice between activities • Notice and respond to how he is • Acknowledge his state, e.g. needing to rest if tired • Using visual feeling cards + supporting strategies
X appears agitated, heightened stressed, withdrawn or frustrated	<p>Change of behaviour:</p> <p>Body language changes</p> <p>Facial expressions show anger/ disappointment</p> <p>Less tolerant</p> <p>Eyeing the people he is unhappy with</p> <p>Physically gets up and moves around, may start to pick things up</p>	<p>Goal: to return X to a ready-to-learn state as quickly as possible</p> <p>Even if behaviour is inappropriate, ensure an even, calm tone and avoid threats of consequences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check for physiological needs ('Let's grab a drink of water/some food') • Lower demands and questions <p>Active listening:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in using feeling cards • If not engaging in conversation, repeat the emotion e.g. I can see you are feeling... <p>Offer a break/use of a break card:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggest a drink or snack • Take a walk outside (with an LSA) • Retreat to his safe space just outside the classroom in the breakout space (large table) <p>Offer an alternative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with a preferred peer • Differentiate task or environment <p>Give space and time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gentle reminder of task at hand • Remove audience or trigger • Suggest an alternative task/learning environment: 'I notice you don't seem to be enjoying this, shall we?'




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Safety or de-escalation plan Page 3		
Emotional & engagement level:	Signs and symptoms of emotional state:	Staff response:
X will have verbal and/or physical aggression towards others or property	Increasing challenge/controlling: Tipping over furniture Throwing objects around the room	Goal: Think de-escalation and safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep interactions and communications to a minimum • Reduce direct proximity and audience (remove children from the class) • Give choice/redirect to alternative space (Build using klikko or watch the fish in Principal's office) • Keep calm and notify SLT immediately (send a runner with a red card) • Offer an out or a calm space (Principal's office to mindfully watch fish) if appropriate and responsive • Allow space and time to calm (Keep a distance but ensure visibility) Fresh face: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If not engaging with you, request support from a known/ trusted adult (LSA, Principal)
Out of control	Loss of physical and emotional control: Grabbing people around the legs and/or waist Pinning people down Running out of the class and into the playground	Goal: Safety and de-escalation: Ensure you are calm and using your own strategies to slow down/regulate (breath out for longer, drop your shoulders) Reduce direct proximity and audience (remove children from the class) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give space around X (allow release of energy) • Refrain from checking-in/talking with him at all at this stage • One key adult managing the situation, a second adult to keep safe eyes from a distance • Tag-out with other 'safe-eyes' adult if necessary
Calming down	Regaining control/ more verbal: Time away from the classroom with minimal sensory input – quiet, activity of his choice	Goal: to increase regulation through distraction, relational connection, low demands, and realistic expectations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not the time to rehash a prior event and have a restorative conversation • Focus on the present and X's re-establishment of emotional regulation
School procedure following a major Incident	Etap the incident – SLT will get this notification Depending on the severity X's mum will be called (ie., physical incident involving furniture or people) Having an SLT member check in and acknowledge the incident and reaffirm support is appreciated.	

Click [here](#) to access a blank template to use in your own setting.



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Endnotes

1 Brown, L. (n.d.) Emotional self-regulation. Thriving with ADHD.

2 Greene, R. W. (2010). The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children. Harper Paperbacks.



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