

Calm, Alert, and Ready to Learn

How to Help Your Child Self-Regulate

Do you ever wonder why kids behave the way they do? They can be so difficult to get along with at times. At other times, they behave perfectly well.

Children's behaviour is affected by how they feel emotionally and physically. It is harder for kids to manage their behaviour and cope with stress when they are tired, hungry, excited, or restless.



When children misbehave, we often think they need discipline. And kids do need discipline sometimes. However, this booklet is about another way to understand and respond to children's behaviour: self-regulation.

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt our physical and emotional energy and our thinking and social skills when we need to. Self-regulation helps us to control our behaviour, handle challenges, and manage stress.

Supporting Our Children

Good parenting helps children develop the ability to self-regulate. We do this by being aware of when a child's physical and emotional energy is not right for the situation and helping them change that energy. That is what happens when you take a toddler in your arms to comfort her, or when you make a cranky child laugh to cheer him up. Other times children need help to release excess energy, calm down, or relax.

This kind of support builds self-regulation. It helps children recognize what it feels like to be in a calm and alert state, emotionally and physically. It also shows them what it feels like to return to a calm and alert state after being excited or upset. Our goal as parents is to teach children to understand and manage their physical state and their feelings in various situations.

This booklet will help you better understand self-regulation. It will also show you strategies you can use to build your children's self-regulation and help them be the best they can be.

Self-Regulation in the Body

Self-regulation helps us manage our behaviour in several ways. In the most basic way, it helps us manage the combination of energy and tension we feel in our bodies. This combination tells us how excited, relaxed, alarmed, alert, or safe we feel.

Our bodies respond automatically to situations. For example, if we need to run from an attacker, our body produces adrenaline to help us run faster. When the threat is over, a special nerve turns on a “brake” that slows our heartbeat and allows us to calm down. These automatic responses are not as well developed in children. The care and comfort of adults actually helps them work properly.

As we mature, our brains and bodies get better at maintaining the ideal level of energy needed for different situations. We learn to recognize when our energy levels are too low or too high, and we learn how to change them. For example, we might take a shower to wake up or listen to music to relax. We also become better at coping with tasks even when we don’t feel our best.

Children have some ability to deal with stress and challenges, but sometimes the effort is exhausting and they cannot cope. When children’s levels of energy and tension don’t match what is needed in a situation, they can’t control their behaviour and emotions well.

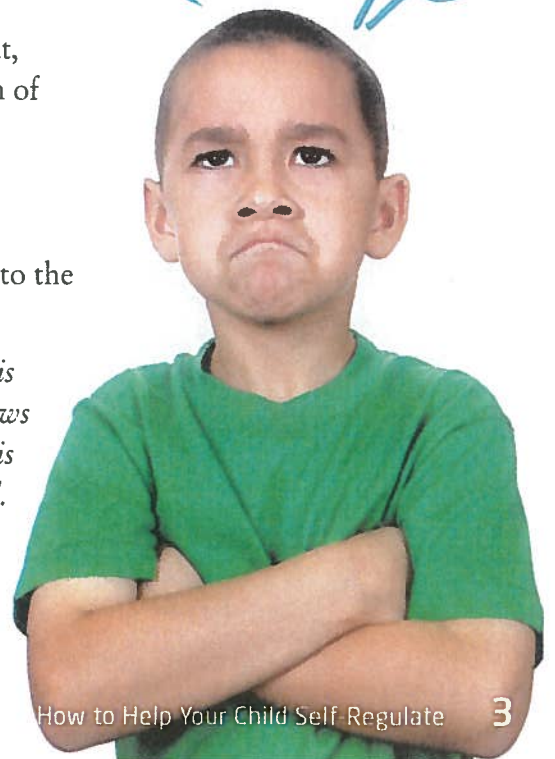
Eight-year-old Dustin is excited about being at the fair. It’s a hot day and Dustin is tired and hungry, but he wants a turn on the bumper cars. After a long wait, the man tells Dustin he’s too small to ride by himself. Dustin has been counting on riding alone. He throws himself on the ground crying. It’s the biggest tantrum he’s ever had.

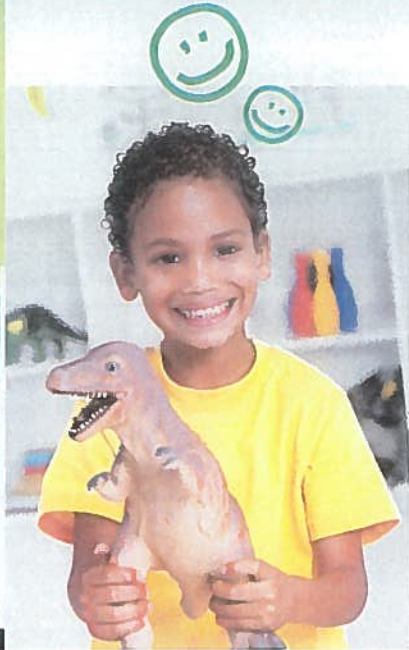
Is he spoiled? No. Is he feeling overwhelmed? Yes. The heat, fatigue, excitement, hunger, and Dustin’s long wait drained him of his ability to deal with disappointment.

Helping Kids Slow Down

Children often need us to help them get their level of energy into the right state for a situation.

It’s bedtime on Halloween night and six-year-old Madison is having a hard time winding down for sleep. Her father knows that telling Madison to go to sleep will not help because she is too excited. Yelling at her would make her even more excited. Instead, he sits on Madison’s bed, puts his arm around her, and starts telling her a story in a quiet, soothing voice.





Madison's dad is helping Madison lower her level of excitement with his quiet presence and comforting physical contact. This helps Madison to learn when her level of energy needs to be slowed down and that it *can* be slowed down.

Helping Kids Get Energized

When children feel tired, listless, or bored, it is difficult for them to find the mental or physical energy a situation requires. They often need our help to feel more energized or excited. We can help them get interested and excited about what they are doing. This gives them the energy they need to complete the task.

"Hey Sammy, let's see how many toys you can put away in one minute. I'll set the timer and you can race against the clock."

Sam's mom could argue with him about clean-up time. Instead, she helps him get interested and find more energy by turning clean-up time into a game.

Helping kids feel calm, alert, and energized when they need to be is a key part of how we help them develop self-regulation skills. Eventually, we can start teaching children how to "regulate" themselves. We do this by helping them identify their own energy level and what they can do to feel better. For example, we might say, *"You're really wound up right now. What could we do to help you slow down?"* This can help children learn how to understand and change their inner energy and tension.

The Starting Point

Self-regulation in the body affects all the other areas of behaviour. To deal with children's anger, attention problems, or lack of cooperation, you need to understand how they feel in their bodies. Helping children adjust their levels of energy and tension often helps them behave better.

Providing Good Care and Support

Meeting children's basic needs is a big part of supporting self-regulation. Good care includes a healthy diet, enough sleep, exercise, and free play. When children are not well cared for they feel uneasy inside.

They burn a lot of energy coping with that feeling. Good care also shows children how to care for themselves.

Good relationships are very important. Connection with parents and other people they love and depend on makes children feel good. This feeling helps them face the world with a positive attitude. That's why small children sometimes take your hand or crawl up in your lap. They are seeking a physical connection that helps them feel safe, calm, and happy.



Some Children Need More

For some children it is more difficult to regulate their levels of energy and tension. These children are often more easily upset and more difficult to calm down than other kids. They are less able to control their behaviour and cope with stress.

Why some kids and not others? It's partly because these kids have to burn more energy to manage their feelings. This constant drain of energy makes it harder for them to stay in a calm and alert state. It becomes more difficult for them to pay attention, resist impulses, be patient, and exert mental effort.

There is no magic solution for these children. It will take them longer to develop self-regulation skills. But they can do it with our help. Read more about how we can help on page 15.

Tips for Calming Children

- Give your child a lot of physical contact, such as hugging them or holding hands with younger children.
- Make sure that your child has plenty of quiet one-on-one time with you.
- Limit noise and clutter. Both can distract children and make it hard for them to concentrate.
- Give children something to do with their hands, such as playing with Plasticine, a fidget toy, or a string of beads.
- Teach them the benefits of taking deep breaths to relax.
- Encourage them to do physical activity (for example, run, skip, jump) when they are restless or can't sit still.

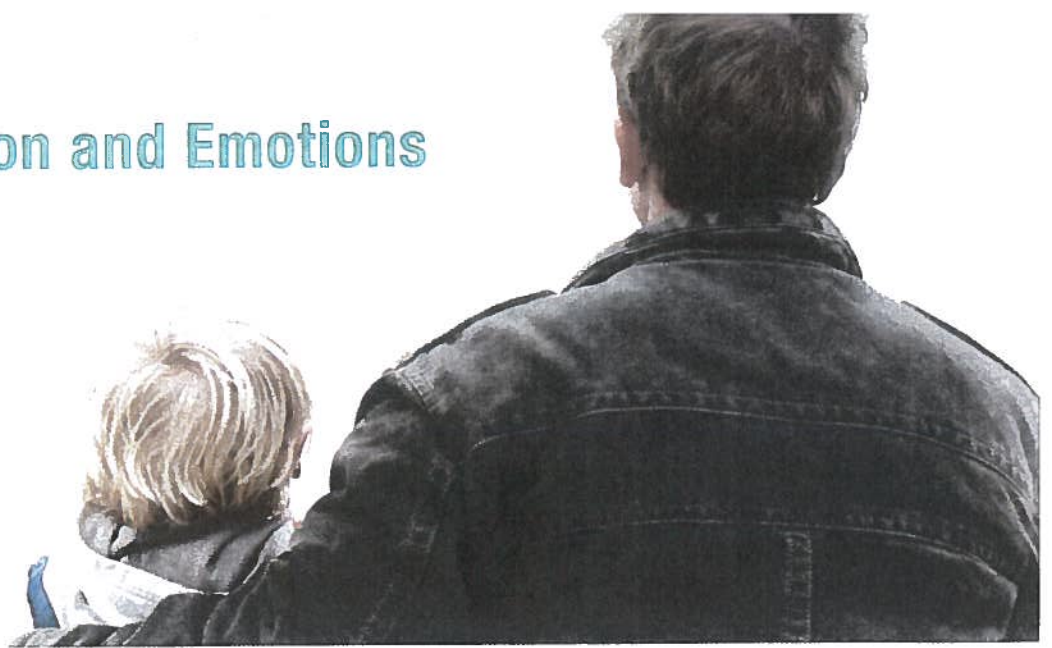


Tips for Energizing Children

- Change your tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures when interacting with your child.
- Turn a task into a game.
- Have your child do a physical activity that uses large muscles, such as lifting objects that strengthen but do not strain muscles.
- Ensure children have a lot of outdoor time.
- Play lively music.



Self-Regulation and Emotions



Emotional self-regulation means being able to understand and manage your emotions. It involves skills like

- talking about feelings
- managing fears and anxieties
- controlling feelings when necessary

Children gradually learn to understand and manage emotions as they grow and their brains develop. They learn these emotional skills through interactions with people. As parents, we have three main tasks:

1. Comfort children when they are upset.
2. Share in their joy when they are happy.
3. Teach our children to talk about their feelings.

Managing “Bad” Feelings

When kids feel sad, angry, or frustrated, we often want to “fix” things by talking them out of their negative feelings. Sometimes, this approach works. However, children also need to learn that negative feelings are normal, and that they can recover and even learn from these feelings. Teaching children to manage negative emotions starts with supporting and comforting kids when they are upset.

Do you remember Dustin’s temper tantrum at the fair? Here is how his parents responded.

Dustin’s father sits down on the ground beside Dustin and puts his hand on his son’s shoulder. He says quietly, “Hey buddy, I know you’re disappointed. You really wanted to ride that bumper car by

yourself.” Dustin’s father pauses and gives Dustin time to cry for a little longer. Then his mother says, “You’re hungry. Let’s go get something to eat and drink.”

Children need time, support, and comfort to help them settle down from temper tantrums or other strong emotions. Once the child is calmer, it is easier for him to control his behaviour, listen to what we have to say, and talk to us about what has upset him.

Dustin’s parents were right not to scold him. They could have threatened him, “*You’d better settle down or we’re never bringing you to a fair again!*” Then he would probably have felt worse and the tantrum could have lasted longer. They could have tried to cheer him up, but Dustin may have been too upset to respond positively.

Instead, Dustin’s father acknowledged the boy’s disappointment. This let him know that negative feelings are normal. His parents remained calm and waited until they sensed Dustin was ready to recover. Then, they began to nudge him in the direction of feeling better. These actions may not have made Dustin feel better instantly but they helped him calm down. Dustin was then more able to cope with his disappointment.



Balancing “Good” Feelings

Positive emotions contribute to good mental health. They also feed children’s creativity and learning and help them get along with people and maintain a positive attitude. We can help by recognizing and sharing children’s good feelings like delight, satisfaction, and excitement.

Maya and her friend have been invited to a sleepover party and they can’t wait to get there. They’re jumping up and down and giggling while Maya’s mother tries to get ready to drive them.

“Wow, are you girls excited! I still have a couple more things to do before I’m ready. Why don’t you get your coats on and put all that energy into loading these bags into the car!”

Like Dustin’s parents, Maya’s mother named the emotions the girls were experiencing. Identifying how a child is feeling and how this emotion affects his or her behaviour helps the child learn to talk more easily about emotions.

Talking About Emotions

When we talk to children about emotional experiences, it helps them learn how emotions affect people. It also teaches them how to repair emotional mistakes. This is an important part of the way they learn to understand and manage their own feelings.



Talking about our emotional responses to situations helps children develop awareness of emotions.

Emma is dancing around the living room when she accidentally bumps into her father, making him spill his coffee. Her father is angry and yells at her to settle down. Then, he feels badly about what he said and apologizes to her. "Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. I know that was an accident." Emma starts to turn away, but her father continues. "When people are upset, sometimes they do things they wished they hadn't. I should have waited a few seconds to calm down before saying something."

Dad is helping Emma understand how negative emotions can affect people's behaviour. His apology teaches Emma the importance of repairing this kind of mistake.

Be a Role Model

How you manage your own emotions is a powerful lesson for your children. Watch what you say when you're upset. When you are angry with your children or partner, take time to cool down. Let your children see you taking deep breaths to control your feelings.

Emotion and the Body

Emotional experiences and physical feelings are often closely linked. For example,

- our heart beats faster when we are excited
- we feel butterflies in our stomach when we are nervous
- our bodies seem to glow when we feel happy

If you want to help a child manage his or her emotions, begin by focusing on the physical aspect. Cuddling a crying toddler can help calm her down before she tells you why she is crying. Having your child take deep breaths if he is angry can help him calm down so he is better able to deal with his anger.

Anxiety in Children

Research suggests that anxiety is becoming a serious problem for some children. When children are anxious, they are in a tense physical state. They burn a lot of energy just coping with their tension. This is energy that could be used to learn, to interact with others, and to feel good about themselves. We can't take away all of our children's anxiety. But we can help them deal with it.

Tips for Responding to Anxiety

- Be aware of your own anxiety. Anxious kids need us to be calm, supportive, and optimistic.
- Listen to children talk about their anxiety and gently question their negative thoughts. Negative thoughts help keep anxiety in place.
- Introduce changes at home slowly. Give children information about how the situation will change and what to expect.
- Remember that children may not snap out of their anxiety easily. Learning to manage anxiety is an ongoing process.
- Watch to see if the anxiety lasts for many months or interferes with a child's daily life. If it does, ask your family doctor to refer you to a psychologist or children's mental health service.

MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about childhood anxiety, look at the following websites:

Anxiety BC

www.anxietybc.com

Children's Mental Health Ontario

www.kidsmentalhealth.ca

For information about childhood stress, visit:

Kids Have Stress Too!

(Psychology Foundation of Canada)

psychologyfoundation.org



Self-Regulation of Thinking

A third part of self-regulation involves developing thinking and learning skills, like memory, reasoning, and problem-solving. Children develop these skills when they work on improving their ability to

- process and use sensory information
- focus their attention
- plan and carry out a series of steps to achieve a goal

Good thinking skills not only help children learn, they also help kids get along with others and make good decisions about their behaviour.

Thinking Starts with the Senses

Our brains get information from our senses. When a child walks into a classroom, her senses pick up all kinds of information. She may be aware of conversations, the background hum of a heating system, how light or dark the room is, its colours, the smell of someone's snack, or the scent of floor cleaner. Her brain makes sense of all this input and turns it into knowledge about what the classroom is like today. This is a normal process that children experience many times each day.

Sometimes, though, children's senses become overloaded. This makes it difficult for their brains to process sensory information. Reducing the amount of sensory input can be helpful for these children. For example, some children concentrate better when there is less noise in the classroom. They may also have an easier time focusing when there are fewer artworks and posters on the walls.



Focusing Attention on the Senses

Today's children spend a lot of time playing with electronic toys, videogames, and media. They also need experiences that require them to pick out and focus on specific sensory information in their environment.

Here are some examples of games that help children think using sensory information. Blindfold a child and have her identify foods by smell. Or encourage children to use their senses to tune in to the natural world.

Liam and his mother are walking in the woods. Liam's mother tells him to stop for a moment and listen to the song of a particular bird. "It's a blue jay," she explains. "It is calling 'Jay! Jay! Jay!'" They listen. At first, Liam can't hear the bird. After a few moments, he starts to notice the sounds of the birds. Finally, he hears the blue jay.

Activities like this help Liam pay attention to his senses and use the information they give him.

Good Thinking Requires Good Attention

Children develop the ability to pay attention as they mature. The improvement comes from a combination of brain growth and experience.

Not all activities that engage children will improve their ability to pay attention. For example, many children spend a lot of time playing video and computer games. These games can be both enjoyable and educational, but they may also be so stimulating that children don't have to work at paying attention.

Children need to be engaged in enjoyable activities that require effort to pay attention. To do this, encourage the use of non-electronic activities that build on your child's interests. For example, try the following activities:

- Talk with your child about a topic he likes. Then, encourage him to stay focused by asking questions that make him think more deeply about it.
- Ask your child to draw a picture or write a story about a video game character. You can help if you like.
- Read to your child. When children are listening to a story, they need to pay attention to imagine the characters and follow the plot.

Children's interest in the activity is key because it helps them pay attention.



Building Planning Skills

For children to make decisions and solve problems, they need to know how to plan and carry out a series of steps. Young children in particular need our help in developing these skills.

One activity that builds children's planning skills is obstacle courses. Doing an obstacle course requires children to plan how to move their bodies to achieve a goal. Other games like Simon Says give children practice in listening and following instructions to make the right movement with their bodies. Treasure hunts and scavenger hunts also teach children to follow steps to reach a goal.

Other activities that help children develop planning and problem-solving skills include

- solving jigsaw puzzles
- playing card and board games that involve strategy (instead of just luck)
- making models and toys from instructions
- helping you follow a recipe
- helping you assemble a piece of furniture from instructions

Making the activity fun and interesting is the best way to help children become fully engaged.

Check Emotional and Physical States

Children's ability to use their thinking skills is greatly affected by how they feel, both emotionally and physically. If your child is having difficulty regulating his thinking, pay attention to his emotions and physical state and deal with problems in those areas if necessary.



Social Self-Regulation

Social self-regulation is about being able to adapt our behaviour and thinking to match social situations. It includes skills such as

- understanding and responding to non-verbal social cues like tone of voice, facial expression, and body language
- taking turns in conversations
- being able to repair communication breakdowns
- understanding how emotions affect people's behaviour

These skills are key. If a child can't manage social situations, he may have difficulty making the best use of his abilities. Even very intelligent or talented people may be held back by their inability to get along and work with other people. We all need social skills, whether we are in school, at work, or at home.

Children develop social self-regulation skills from interacting with people. Children observe how people respond to what they say and do. Gradually, they figure out how to make friends and deal with people.



Managing Each Other's Feelings

Social self-regulation is partly about the way people help manage each other's feelings. People help each other feel more comfortable, safe, excited, or energetic depending on the situation. For example, if someone is angry, we may soften our voice or be quiet to help calm them. If someone seems tense, we may make jokes to ease the tension.

Children learn these social skills from experience and observation. We can help children develop social regulation skills by guiding their learning in difficult situations.

Eleven-year-old Mindy and her mother are having an argument. When Mindy swears at her mother, her mother walks away. She says she will not discuss the matter any further if Mindy talks to her like that. Mindy goes to her dad. "Did you see that? She just walked away from me when I was talking to her!" Mindy's father sees that Mindy is really upset. He suggests they go sit in the living room for a minute and take a timeout. After a few minutes, her father says, "I know you're frustrated, but you called your mother a name. First, that behaviour isn't polite. Second, that's not how you get somebody to listen to your point of view."

Mindy's father is helping her understand how words and actions affect others. Through his own behaviour, he gives Mindy a good example of how to respond to someone who is upset. Along with Mindy's social experiences and gradual maturation, this good parental guidance helps her develop social regulation skills.

Our ability to regulate socially is greatly affected by our physical and emotional feelings. The reverse is also true. Being able to reach out to other people for support can help us feel better when we are anxious, sad, overexcited, exhausted, or discouraged.

Helping Children Build Empathy

Building children's social skills helps them to become kind, caring people. As parents, we try to teach children to be good people in various ways. We may

- reward a child's good behaviour
- correct a child when she behaves poorly
- read stories that contain moral lessons
- model good behaviour
- introduce a child to religious or other kinds of moral teachings that encourage positive attitudes and behaviour

Remember that no matter what social skills children have learned they won't be able to use them when they feel anxious, upset, or angry. Helping children to be calm, alert, and content will make it easier for them to be respectful, show empathy, and learn the lessons we try to teach.

Supporting self-regulation helps children become successful, likeable, and caring people who make positive contributions to their families and communities.

Parent Self-Regulation Is Very Important

If we aren't self-regulated, it's harder for us to guide our children. We need to pay attention to our own self-regulation.

- Look after yourself. Like our children, we need a healthy diet, rest, and exercise.
- Manage your own energy level and emotions using self-regulation skills.
- Get support from others, especially spouses, friends, and family members. Research shows that parents are more effective when they feel supported.

All Kids Are Different



As we all know, children are not all the same. Self-regulation comes more easily to some than to others. There are many reasons for this. One important factor is temperament. All children are born with temperamental traits that can affect self-regulation.

Children who are socially reserved or cautious can control impulses fairly easily. Their natural cautiousness helps them. However, these same children might actually feel tense even when they appear quiet and well behaved. Emotional and social regulation may be challenging for these children.

Other children are born explorers. They have few natural inhibitions that keep their behaviour under control. They have difficulty controlling impulses, remembering instructions, and obeying rules. On a positive side, they may be more open to new situations.

Other children are emotionally sensitive. They are easily upset and hard to calm. As a result, their emotional skills will develop more slowly.

Keep in Mind

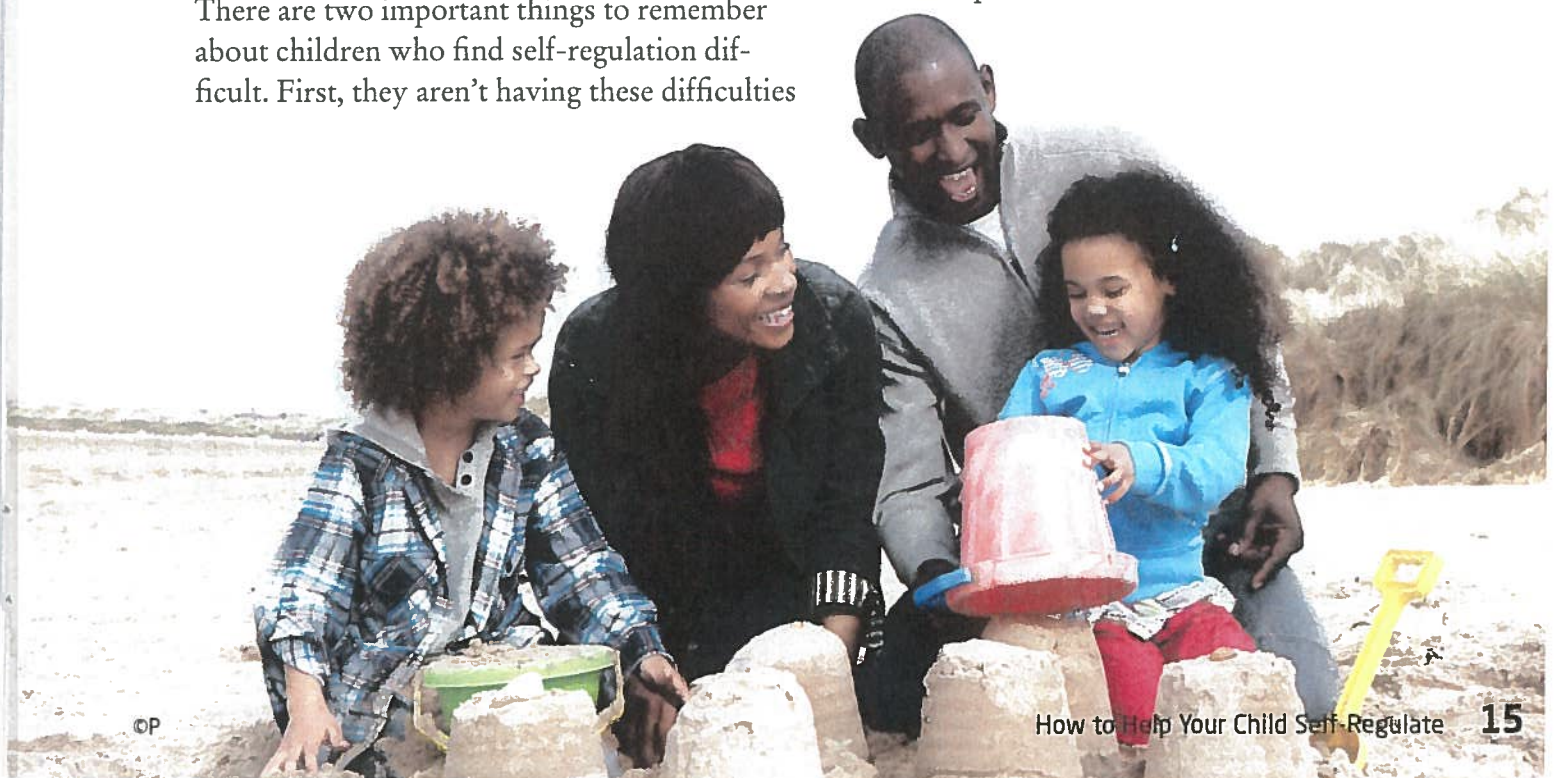
There are two important things to remember about children who find self-regulation difficult. First, they aren't having these difficulties

on purpose. And second, you can't just make them become like other kids.

These children need more guidance and supervision from adults. They need more help staying calm, focused, and content. They may need help for a long time, maybe their whole childhood. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Don't give up.
- Try not to blame your child.
- Try not to blame yourself.
- Try to be patient, but forgive yourself when you're not.
- Ask for help from family, friends, and professionals.
- In a tough situation, don't ask yourself "What's wrong with this kid?" Instead, ask "What can I do to help change this child's energy, tension, or mood?" This will make your discipline strategies work better.

Last, but not least, really enjoy the good times with your child. Due to their challenging behaviour, difficult kids usually receive more disapproval and less praise. Remember that all kids need positive interaction.



Do you ever wonder why your kids act the way they do? They can be so difficult to get along with at times. At other times they behave perfectly.



The answer to this question may be found in self-regulation. Self-regulation affects all of us—parents and children alike—every day. It makes our hearts beat faster when we are frightened. When we take a deep breath to calm ourselves, that's self-regulation too.

Self-regulation helps us to

- focus our attention on a task we need to complete
- be aware of our emotions and manage them when we need to
- think before we act
- handle frustration more effectively
- be patient

Children, especially young children, are just beginning to understand and manage their behaviours and emotions. As parents, you can help your children learn these valuable abilities and skills. In fact, you are already building your child's self-regulation when you hug your son when he is upset or work on a puzzle with your daughter to help her focus her attention.

This book provides information, tips, and strategies on self-regulation. It is based on a best-selling book for teachers called *Calm, Alert, and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation*, written by Dr. Stuart Shanker.



About the Author

JOHN HOFFMAN is one of Canada's leading writers in the area of parenting, child development, and children's mental health. He has written 15 educational booklets for parents, over 200 articles on parenting in the popular media, and has worked closely with Dr. Stuart Shanker to help make the concept of self-regulation accessible to parents.

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