

Emotion Regulation

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1. What is emotion regulation_

Kia ora, my name is Emma Worsfold and I'm a SENCO at a school in Christchurch and I've got Jessica Caldwell with me here today. She's a psychologist for child, adolescent and family service in Christchurch and we're going to talk about emotional regulation. So Jess, what is emotion regulation? Yeah, so emotion regulation is, it allows us to calm down and make better choices when we respond to big emotions and feeling really worked up and it sounds simple but we're not born with the ability to regulate our emotions and so supporting our children to learn to regulate a wide range of emotions is one of the most important things that we can do.

So I think it's important for us to as a parent and a caregiver. So why is it so important? I think to understand why it's so important it's helpful to understand why we have emotions because I'm sure there's been lots of times where we've all wished emotions didn't exist. I mean they can be really painful but emotions are important because they provide us information, they send us signals.

So if I was waiting for someone to be picked up, I would be waiting for someone to pick me up and I would be waiting for someone to pick me up and I would be waiting for someone to pick me up and I would be waiting for someone to pick me up and I'd be waiting for someone to pick me up and I would be waiting for them to pick me up and my back was picked up and I'd be waiting for someone to pick up and it's late at night and I'm standing on the street and I'm feeling a bit anxious I'm noticing my heart is racing and my breathing is getting a bit quicker.

I mean that's just sending a signal to me that I need to do something to keep myself safe so I might walk around the corner where there's more people and it's better lit. So emotions are important but if we lived in a world where humans couldn't regulate their emotions it would be pretty chaotic.

so everyone would just be acting on their emotions without any thought so if I was at work the first sign of frustration I'm gonna quit I'm not gonna think about how I'm gonna pay my bills I'm gonna put food on like the plate for my family I'm just gonna feel the emotion and

act on it so if we don't have the ability to regulate our emotions our emotions would actually end up controlling us and good emotion regulation has been linked with more positive relationships linked with academic outcome and also increased resilience so it's a really really important skill and one that we learn from birth throughout childhood and and on to adulthood yeah it's an important life-saving skill.

Very important.

2. Skills to build emotional regulation

What are the skills that children learn and develop when building emotional regulation? Yeah, so children aren't born with any understanding of emotions, so they don't know how to recognise them, they don't know what it feels like in their body, and they don't have any language to describe what's going on. So the first thing is children learn to recognise how it feels in their body and notice what's going on for them. So if they're feeling a little bit anxious, again, noticing the heart racing a little bit, they might feel a bit sick in their tummy or having butterflies in their tummy. So being able to recognise the body cues of what's going on.

So once they're able to recognise the emotion, it's then being able to put words to that experience and label it. So we start with the basic emotions, so things like happy. Sad, angry, scared. And then as children get older and into adulthood, we learn more complex emotions. So things like jealousy and humiliation. So it's learning how to recognise them. It's learning to put language to them and label what they're feeling. And then it's about how do they manage that emotion? How do they ride out that feeling? And this is things like taking a deep breath, walking outside, or talking to someone about what's going on.

So how do they learn these skills? How does it happen? Yeah, so children learn to recognise their emotions, label their emotions and manage them within the context of a really safe supportive relationship. So this is where the relationship with the parents or caregivers come in. So when children are born, because they have no ability, parents are the main way that they regulate their emotions. So a baby cries, the parent or caregiver will pick them up and soothe them. And so that's the kind of whole regulation in that place. As children develop, parents slowly take less of a role. So even when children are younger, it might be they're left to cry just for a little bit longer, and they might...

soothe themselves by sucking their thumb. It might be, once they're toddlers, parents offer a hug when the toddler's crying. And as they get older, you know, the parents offering suggestions like, shall we go find the dog and see what the dog is doing? And it's just kind of a bit of a distraction and helps take their mind off things. And eventually, children start kind of learning this and take on board and begin to do it themselves. But it's not... it's not something they learn overnight. It is a... it's forever developing, and it's like any other skill. You can't practice a guitar once and be a rock star.

We have good days. We have bad days. Just because we've managed it once before doesn't mean that it's going to happen again. So it's a developmental process. Yes. Yeah.

3. What can whanau do to support emotion regulation in children

Jess, what can parents and caregivers do to help support emotional regulation in their children? Yeah, so I think often when we see our child experiencing an unpleasant emotion, an automatic response as a parent or caregiver is we want to make them feel better, we want to make that emotion go away. And this can be really well-meaning, and we say things like, you're okay, it's okay, don't be silly, you're fine. But actually in that moment it's dismissing the child's experience, their emotional experience. So what we want to do instead is we want to kind of lean into the emotion and validate the emotion.

Because what can happen is if children's emotions are dismissed enough throughout their childhood, they learn that emotions can be like a bad thing, or they learn not to trust their own emotions. Which can become quite problematic in adulthood where we can get adults who want to numb and push away emotions. And what do you mean by validating the emotion? Yeah, so validating the emotion is communicating to the child that we understand, we understand the emotion, or we're trying to understand how they're feeling. And that it's okay to feel that way. It's normal, and it makes sense. It's about not rushing in and fixing the problem for them, or dismissing it.

It's about listening, validating the emotion. Yeah, absolutely. And I think we've all had experiences where we've felt a really big emotion, and we've gone to tell someone about what's going on for us, and we've had that emotional dismissive response, even though it's, again, really well-meaning. So if I've had a really... I've had a really rough day at work, and I come home and I'm telling my partner about this awful day I've had. And if he comes in and tries to either fix it by saying, you know, giving me solutions, well, just talk to your manager, or how about you find a new job. Sometimes it can actually make you feel more, like make the emotion feel even bigger.

Or if they come in with another type of dismissive response where they might say, you know, you should be so thankful, you've got a job at the moment, or you're really lucky because you only have to do eight-hour days, where, you know, I do 10-hour days. I've come in with this big emotion, and with the best intention, but emotionally dismissing, I can actually feel worse. So validating and just listening first before we provide any solutions can just be something as simple to communicate that I get it, I understand, and that can just be, that sounds really tough. And you can kind of almost feel the difference between those two responses of being, giving suggestions or kind of being told, don't worry about it, versus just someone getting it and just saying, that sounds really tough.

And even without providing any solution or, you know, we're not fixing the problem, it's still been a really rough day, that can actually even help decrease that emotion in the moment. And at what point would you offer a solution or, some sort of way of helping or fixing the problem? Yeah, so with children, it's really important, because every moment is a teaching moment. So that validation is providing the opportunity to help children recognise what emotions might be going on for them. So it's not telling them that we know what they're feeling, but it's just being curious and asking questions and wondering what they might be feeling.

And validating that, you know, it's okay to feel that way, it's understandable, so that's giving that message, it's okay to feel emotions, and it's, we still, we still might not rush into fixing the problem after that, but what, because what we want to do is make sure that the child's calm enough to hear it. So if they're not calm enough at that point, it might be, you know, providing, do you want a hug? Can we go for a walk outside? And then, although even in doing, sometimes some of that is still trying to fix it, but the more kind of practical solutions of, how about we go do this? Happen, it really needs to happen when they're feeling a bit calmer.

There's no pressure to fix every problem, just emphasising and validating. Yeah. Can be enough, and it's really important too. It is, and you'll be so surprised how helpful just listening and validating can be, because it's so natural as a parent to just want to fix it and take away that pain. Yeah.

4. Emotion Coaching

So what are some practical things that parents and caregivers can do to help their child with their emotional regulation? Well the first and most important step is managing our own emotions. So when our child is experiencing a big emotion, that often elicits an emotion in us. It's been a really long day, we're exhausted and our child has just thrown dinner off the table and hit their brother. So absolutely we are going to be feeling really frustrated, perhaps quite angry. But if we aren't able to regulate our emotions, our response isn't going to be a helpful one. So that's the very first thing, is managing and regulating our own emotions and doing what we need to.

So that can be taking a step out of the room, taking a deep breath before coming in. And once we're feeling in a space where we can do that, Emotion Coaching is an area that's got a lot of research for supporting children to regulate their emotions. An emotion coach is like a soccer coach coaches us how to play soccer. An emotion coach helps us to better understand our emotions and manage our emotions. And Dr John Gottman created emotion coaching. And I'm just going to talk about that. I'm going to start breaking it into three steps. The first step is helping your child recognise and label the emotion.

And to be able to do this we need to be curious about what's going on for them. So we need to, when the big emotion happens and they may be crying, instead of jumping in and saying, I think you must be really angry, you can check out a little bit, so ask a few questions. And then we want to empathise with them and also validate the emotion. And then the third one is to promise. So it is quite a lot to remember, especially while, like I said, you are likely experiencing a whole lot of emotions too. So there is an acronym that can be quite helpful with those three steps. And that acronym is LEAPS.

So it stands for Label, Empathise, and Problem Solve. Which helps you to get it into the right order. So name the emotion, empathise with the emotion, and then we move on to the problem solving. Yeah, and that order is, again, really important because we want to help coach in that moment for children to recognise what's going on for them, help label it, help them understand that we get it and it's okay to feel those emotions. And at that point, is there anything we can do to help them? Anything we can do to help them either manage their emotion or fix the problem that's caused the big emotion.

5. Hand brain model - Flip the Lid

So Jess, what about when a child is in the middle of a meltdown and they're just not listening to anything that you're telling them or asking them to do? Yes, so I think we can all absolutely recognise this. We're talking about three steps that you can do and how to help, but actually when your child is in just this absolute meltdown, it feels like nothing's reaching them. So to better understand that, I think it's helpful to have an understanding of how the brain works. And Dan Siegel actually created a very handy hand model to think about how the brain works. So if we imagine this is the brain sitting in here, we have two parts of the brain.

So we've got your upstairs brain and your downstairs brain. So the downstairs brain is... where our automatic processes happen, our breathing, keeping our body temperature regular, and also where our emotional part of the brain is. So this part of the brain, it's automatic. There's no thinking involved in this part of the brain. Then on our upstairs brain, this is our thinking part of the brain. This is where we think logically. We think about consequences, and we think about what other people might be experiencing as well. So when our brain is all working together, that's absolutely... we'll feel an emotion, a big emotion, and at the same time we're still thinking things through.

So something's really upset us. This big emotion has made us really, really angry. We've had the urge to break the table in front of us, but our thinking part of our brain is like, I might actually hurt myself, and, you know, this is really going to upset Mum. So what happens, though, in a meltdown, when the emotion is really, really intense, or we've gone into something called fight-flight-freeze, which is an automatic response to danger. So that one's a really automatic process where cortisol and adrenaline pump through our body to keep us safe, to fight the danger, or run away from the danger.

So in our downstairs brain, if that's taken over, what can happen is we flip our lid. So our brain doesn't flip, but what actually happens is the upstairs brain is no longer working. So we've flipped this lid, and we're just working from this downstairs bit, which is just pure emotion. So in a meltdown where we have flipped our lid and the emotion is really big, that is why it does, you know, it absolutely feels like we're not getting through, because we're actually not, because this thinking part of the brain is offline. So in that moment where a child is at that point, it is purely just about supporting them to get through that really big emotion, to eventually get their lid back down.

And it may, you know, the child may be okay and want a hug in that moment to help them come down. They may not want you anywhere near them. And at the moment, all we can do is just be calm, be with the emotion, and just help them ride it out until they do kind of regulate a bit more. They still might be upset, but they're a bit more regulated. And it's at that point we can, you know, actually engage with them. So that's why those steps are important. To label the emotion first and then empathise with the emotion, because the problem-solving part's not going to happen in a brain that's got the lid flipped.

Yeah, absolutely. And sometimes even those beginning stages when it's really flipped still don't feel like they're getting through, but, you know, that's okay. So it's just about keeping them safe in that moment. Yeah, keeping them safe, keeping them, just helping them get through that really big emotion. And you can tell the difference between a meltdown, that's your downstairs brain, or your upstairs brain. So if you come home and you're giving some chips for afternoon tea, and your child says, I want the chicken chips, I want the chicken chips. Well, we only have plain chips. So I'm going to give you the plain chips.

And then all of a sudden, this huge emotion erupts, because I wanted the chicken chips. But, you know, we're guessing it might be downstairs, or downstairs meltdown. And how we know that is because we might say, I've found some chicken chips, here you go, you know, it's okay, I've found the chicken chips, it's okay, everything's okay, but nothing's, it doesn't make it better. It doesn't matter what you do. No, no, you could almost at that point offer them \$100, and it's not going to make any difference. Because the lid's completely flipped. Yeah, there's no, there's no thinking. So that's that downstairs meltdown, whereas an upstairs meltdown where absolutely we're still feeling emotion, we're still, the child still might be crying and feeling really upset, that's where the other things that we talked about come in.

So the label, empathise, and problem solve. You know, so at that point actually if you gave them the chicken chips, they're probably going to feel quite a bit better. So it's really important to remember, yeah, think about that upstairs, downstairs, can they actually think things through? And with the handbrain model as well, thinking about we also, can flip our lids too. And I'm sure we've all experienced this where we've acted on an emotion, and then after just being like, I can't even believe I said that or did that. Yeah. And that's because our upstairs brain isn't engaged and we're not thinking.

Yeah. Yeah. So when a child is flipped their lid, it's really important that we work to keep, keep ours down. Keep our lids down. Yeah. We'll recognise when it's about to flip and again, it might be leaving the room, taking some time, so you can come back in with your lid on to support the child who's flipped their lid.

6. I don't understand where this outburst came from

So you talked about the chicken chips analogy, but I often have parents that will say to me, I just do not know where this meltdown or outburst has come from. What is going on when something happens and you have no idea why? Yeah, so it can come completely out of the blue, it feels like everything's going okay, and it can feel like the smallest, most unusual thing that can trigger this huge response. So I've got some props here to help me explain that, because I think it's really important to think about everything that's going on in the child's day as a layered effect. So what we've got here is a bottle of stress.

So this just represents anything throughout the day that can slightly stress a child, so it can be big or small. And then we've got a glass. So this glass represents... how much stress that we can take at one time. And so everyone's got a glass. And we can even come into

the day with a glass already full from a really full-on day before us. So it doesn't necessarily empty every day. So if we think about the layered response, we might have a child who... So every stress that comes in... it's just kind of going to pour into the glass at a different amount. So if we think about... So if you haven't slept very well...

Absolutely, yep. So you haven't slept very well, that's going to pour it in. It might have been a stormy night, just keep the child up, up and down throughout the night. So absolutely, that's a big stress, lack of sleep. It could be in the morning, the child finds out that dad's taking them to school instead of mum, which is, you know, it's common. It's cool, it's exciting, dad's taking them to school, but it's a change. It's just a change in routine. Then they get to school and there's a reliever in the classroom. Yes, they weren't expecting the reliever and they're not super good with change.

So that's a more... What else can come up? Maybe they were thinking that they had the chocolate biscuits in their lunchbox, but actually it turned out they were plain biscuits in their lunchbox. Yep. So this is the thing, like it can just be... Tiny things. We can have a massive pour or tiny things. The pen they wanted, someone else took it. Or if it's still raining, they're not able to go outside and play, so they're stuck inside. And maybe the noise from being stuck inside all day at school. Yes, that kind of constant overload of noise. And then they tripped up walking to the car. Yeah, yep.

So again, not a big thing, but these all add up. And you can... Also, we do empty our glasses. We do empty them fast throughout the day as well. So these are things that help calm us and relax us. So if they could take some time during the day in the noisy classroom to pop some headphones on and listen to music over in the reading corner and get a bit of quiet space. So while stresses are pouring in, we also can do some nice things that help take it out. But if there's more stress, then we can kind of take out of there. The little things add up.

um i don't know our brother beat us to the door we wanted to be first to open the door these just little things and um then what we talked about with the chicken chips you know i wanted the chicken chips but there was none seems like yeah it is an inconvenience i get it you want the chicken chips they're not there and it might have happened 50 times before and not actually been a problem but today it's a problem but today the glass is really full and there's only plain chips and it's at that point that the glass overflows um and that kind of big emotion comes out may or may not have kind of flipped our lid but it is really you know the really big kind of big emotions and so while it seems like the small little thing and we can't understand it but actually when we think about it is that layered accumulative effect it just helps us understand it a bit more and i guess at that point if you when you give them the chicken chips and the chicken chips don't solve the problem it's because it's not about the chips it's about the 10 other things that have happened yeah yeah and i think all of us adults can also relate to this as well um absolutely yeah you know where you've had the same experience a hundred times but today you can't do it you end up yelling at someone you end up storming out of a meeting and it's the same thing it's we haven't slept we've got all these other things going on we've got deadlines and it's the last thing that overflows

7. Emotion coaching and maintaining limits

What about when children are being naughty? Are we not just letting them get away with really bad behaviour? Yeah, this is a question that comes up quite often because it's quite a nice, warm approach. And it seems sometimes counterintuitive when your child's done something that they've broken the rules. They've hit their brother. But it's the both. We want to hold the both. So emotion coaching is the first part because when we think about discipline, the whole purpose of that is to provide teaching moments. And emotion coaching and coming in and being curious, wondering what's going on, being empathetic and helping the child label that emotion, that's helping them learn what was happening for me to want to hit my brother.

And helping them then know, how about we... take some deep breaths. So we want to do that part. And at the same time, it's still holding the limits. There's still rules. There's still consequences. So we do this first part. And it's important because if we go on to talking about rules and consequences and the child's not regulated, they're not going to be in a place where they're going to be able to take that on board anyway or listen to anything. So it's the regulation of emotion coaching first. Validate. And... Hey, you know it's not okay to hit your brother. Whatever the consequence might be in that moment.

And what about when our children are having big emotions and we totally lose our cool and we just can't respond in the way that you've talked about? Yes. So, again, we all have our own glasses that overflow. And there's no such thing as perfect parenting. So, absolutely. There are going to be times where we haven't been able to regulate our own emotions. And a big emotion comes out and we may have yelled. But it's actually about what happens after that's really important. And so it's just acknowledging what happened and bringing it up with your child and just making sure when you're both at a lids-down regulated space, acknowledging what happened and just saying, you know, I'm really sorry that I yelled at you.

That mustn't have been very nice. And it's not okay. So it's... Yeah. While we try not to get to that point, everyone does. It's just acknowledging that it happens and repairing that with our children. Mm-hmm.

8. How emotions were managed in our own family

I've also heard that as parents or caregivers, it's really important for us to have an understanding of how emotions were managed and addressed in our family when we were growing up. Yeah, so when our child has a big emotion, we often have a really automatic response. So that might be the kind of dismissing, no, no, emotions, don't feel that. That's, you're okay, you're fine, everything's fine, and just kind of brushing it away. We might also feel really angry in that moment as well. So these automatic responses are shaped by, yeah, our own family and how emotions were responded to. So were emotions, was it okay to feel emotions in your family?

You know, or was it actually, it's not okay to feel angry, anger's not expressed in this household, if you feel anger, slightest sense of anger, you know, we leave and we don't talk about it. Or it could have been actually anger was a really scary thing in the house, and it was quite uncontained. So I think when we're thinking about how we parent our children, it's always useful just to take a moment to think about our own family of origin and how emotions were talked about. Were they okay? Weren't they okay? How was it dealt with? Because that can be some of our automatic responses. So when we just take a moment to think about that, it can just help give a little bit of space before we have that automatic response where we can think and just do things a bit more consciously.

That makes sense. Well thanks, Jess, that's been really interesting. There's lots of good things in there for us to think about. And hopefully that's going to help us when working with children and helping them to develop some emotional regulation. So that's been great, thank you. You're welcome, hopefully it's helpful. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.