Self-Regulation: The Role of Responsive Caregivers

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Learner Objectives

- Attendees will learn:
  - Definition of self-regulation and examples in early childhood settings.
  - Overview of how self-regulation develops from birth and ways to support the growth and maturation of self-regulation.
  - Why relationships are key instruments in the development of self-regulation.
  - Specific calming strategies to teach children and unique techniques recommended for: anger outbursts, anxiety, attention problems, mood disorders, struggling with social skills, and children with sensory issues.

What is Self-Regulation?

- Person’s ability to provide control over his or her emotional responses to arousing situations
- Being able to do something because it is needed
- Includes being able to:
  - Inhibit automatic responses
  - Control one’s emotions
  - Control attention and cognitive processes
  - Plan and control behavior
  - Delay gratification

Self-regulation = Thermostat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thermostat</th>
<th>Self-regulation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senses and measures temperature</td>
<td>Evaluate what you hear, see, smell, touch, and taste</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compares reading to setting</td>
<td>Compare to what you already know</td>
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<td>Communicates to furnace</td>
<td>Communicates to motor and language systems</td>
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<td>Active, intentional process (have to choose what temp to set it at)</td>
<td>Requires intentional decisions (“I will not hit Andrew”) and active processes (sit on one’s hands)</td>
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<td>Device actively monitors the environmental temps</td>
<td>Monitors conditions to maintain optimal arousal for given task</td>
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<td>Monitors conditions to maintain optimal temp</td>
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What does it look like?

- Child stops playing and begins cleaning up when asked
- Construction workers pour cement outside the window but student can ignore it and focus on their work
- Child is teased but is able to ignore the comment and walk away
- In order to do this they must have regulated thoughts, emotions and behavior

Where does self-regulation come from?

- Genetics
  - Inherited traits and be changed (aren’t predestined)
- Home & parenting practices
  - Emotional support
    - Meaningful praise, affection, sensitivity to child’s needs, encouragement instead of criticism, coldness, and indifference
  - Cognitive Support
    - Intellectual stimulation from parents & resources (asking questions, reflection, reading books, playing with toys)
  - Well-structured and consistent rules
**HOW DOES THE BODY RESPOND?**
- Happens in the same part of the brain as reward and emotion processing (prefrontal cortex)
- Emotional responses happen on 3 levels
  - Bodily response (body's reaction to the emotion)
    - Increased blood pressure, increase heart rate, adrenaline rush, cortisol release
  - Behavioral (outward expression seen by person's actions)
  - Experiential (internal experience of an emotion)
- Example: You almost get in a car accident

**THE BRAIN (LION, LIZARD, LEARNING)**
- Lizard (brain stem-not the smartest part)
- Lion - midbrain – the body’s fire alarm (the lion gets out of its cage sometimes and get out of control - need to learn how to put the lion back in its cage)
  - if you make a fist and put your thumb behind your fingers it acts like the lion for a kid metaphor
- Learning brain - prefrontal cortex - thinking spot - it goes on vacation when the fire alarm goes off - needs time to get the alarm turned off and thinking brain to come back from vacation

**WHAT IS DYSREGULATION?**
- Emotional responses that are out of one's control
- Volcano example
- Most children know they are supposed to “use their words” instead of fighting, but only children with self-regulation skills are actually able to use them.

**DYSREGULATION IS LIKE THE BRAKES LOCKING UP IN A CAR**
- 3 things that unlock the brain's brakes:
  - Muscle movement
  - Breathing
  - Rehydrating (water goes directly to the brain)
- Suggesting that a child goes for a walk to get a drink takes care of all 3!

**WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT SELF-REGULATION?**
- 30% of children entering kindergarten lack the social and emotional skills to be “ready” for school (up to 40% in low-income families)
- Learning socially disruptive patterns of behavior can evolve into physical aggression and bullying
- If self-regulatory behaviors aren’t introduced at a young age the brain areas may not develop to their full potential

**HOW IS REGULATION LEARNED?**
- It isn’t present at birth therefore it must be learned
- Stages:
  - Infant (requires parent to help calm)
    - Attachment figure acts as a template for emotion processing in the brain
  - Mutually influence the state of each other
  - Toddlerhood (begin to use language to communicate needs and wants)
    - May be able to respond and comply with directives
    - Can use some distraction and help-seeking abilities
HOW IS REGULATION LEARNED?
- Preschool (reflective, begin to be able to do it on their own)
  - May require cues and support as they learn to calm themselves
- School-age (guided by sense of self and the environment)
  - Know to talk about what they are excited about instead of jumping up and down
- Adolescence (hormones re-enter and creates upheaval)
  - By this age self-regulation is an internalized skill

THE SKILLS...LET’S BREAK THEM DOWN
- Co-regulation (adult helps to regulate the child)
  - Usually infants require this type of calming
  - Children with attachment disorders may not have had the opportunity to experience this type of regulation
- Modeling
  - Demonstrate the appropriate behavior
  - Adult labels the feeling and calms themselves and then helps the child calm down

BREAK THEM DOWN SOME MORE
- Using hints and cues
  - Adult points to pictures of calming strategies as a reminder to child
  - Reminders about holding hands in lap while giving directions to help focus attention
- Gradually withdraw adult support
  - Child begins to internalize the skill
  - Child can self-regulate in many situations
  - Child may still need adult reminders and support as well as practice

WHAT CAN TEACHERS AND CAREGIVERS DO TO HELP?

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO?
- CALM YOURSELF FIRST
  - Teaching self-regulation to young children requires strong caregiver self-regulation
- Be aware of where children’s social-emotional development is at
- Build meaningful relationships with the children
  - Without the relationship it will be very difficult to help the child learn self-regulation skills

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN
Why is it important?
- They are at the foundation of everything we do.
- Children learn and develop in the context of relationships.
- Children with the most challenging behaviors especially need these relationships.
- Adults’ time and attention are very important to children.
- Parents and other colleagues are critical partners in building children’s social emotional competence.
  - We should all work together to ensure children’s success and prevent challenging behavior.
**RELATIONSHIP BUILDERS**
- Greet every child by name.
- Post children’s work around the room.
- Call/tell a child’s parent in front of them to say what a great day she is having or send home positive notes.
- Give hugs, high fives and thumbs up accomplishing tasks.
- When a child misses school tell him how much he was missed.
- Acknowledge children’s efforts.
- Give compliments liberally.
- Call a child after a difficult day and say, “I’m sorry we had a tough day today. I know tomorrow is going to be better!”
- Find time to read to individual children or a few children at a time.
- Find out what a child’s favorite book is and bring it along on a visit or read it to the whole class.
- Play with children, follow their lead.

**IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE…**
- How do you want someone to handle your mistakes?
- A calm, warm correction and redirection of students are more likely to prevent further impulsive or challenging behaviors than a rebuke that makes the student feel bad.
- Do you think they woke up this morning wanting to make that mistake?

**WHAT CAN CAREGIVERS DO TO HELP?**
- Provide stability and consistency
  - Clear rules, limit-setting, routines
- Accept the child’s emotions and emotional responses
  - Emotional outbursts aren’t intentional
  - Everyone is entitled to their emotions
- Identify triggers and use them to teach problem solving
  - Help children be aware of the stages in the build up of tension
- Encourage children to talk about feelings
  - Point them out in books, classroom, faces, etc.

**WHAT CAN CAREGIVERS DO TO HELP?**
- Talk about your own feelings
  - Model for children how to express and cope with big feelings
- Remember you are a model
  - How do you handle your own emotions?
  - Children learn from what they see adults doing around them
- Encourage kids to “take a calm down break”
- Praise their efforts to regulate their emotions
  - Aggressive and impulsive children receive more negative feedback and less praise, even when they are behaving appropriately

**TEACHING BASIC EMOTIONAL STATES**
- Label emotions as you see them
- Start with the 4 basic emotions
  - Happy, sad, angry, afraid
- Feelings matching games
- Children’s books
- Posters of feelings
- Photo emotion cards

**EMOTION CHART**

*Image of an emotion chart with various facial expressions labeled with emotions such as Happy, Sad, Angry, Scared, Silly, Excited, Surprised, Shy, and Embarrassed.*
WHY SHOULD WE TAKE TIME TO TEACH IT?
- Children develop the foundational skills for self-regulation in the first 5 years of life
  - It can be incorporated into ordinary activities
- Children need many opportunities to experience and practice the skills with responsive adults and capable peers
- Improved learning abilities and future reading and math scores
- Poor self-regulation is associated with greater likelihood of expulsion from school programs
- Teaching a child how to appropriately express themselves is more important than teaching them coping strategies

YOU DON’T NEED A CURRICULUM TO TEACH SELF-REGULATION
- Sensitive teachers and staff were consistent, positive, warm, and appropriately responsive to children’s cues
- Making the changes will help the children who have lower self-regulation abilities
- Make environmental changes (adapt to meet needs)

WHAT IS THIS TEAM DOING?
- A time to “work together” to problem solve and think about how to do things differently
- Not a time to shun and send the person (who needs the help and encouragement) away from caring adults

LETS PRACTICE A FEW STRATEGIES...

VIDEOS TO TEACH CALMING DOWN
- Self-regulation and SR Board
  - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hYNNFUoBFA
- Young child version
- Move with Me

BREATHING EXERCISES ON CD
**STRATEGIES IN “KID” LANGUAGE**

**SEE THE LAST FEW PAGES OF YOUR HANDOUT**

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**Glitter Ball & Glitter Wand**
- Calm your thoughts and things become clearer
- Important things rise to the top

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**Active Calmers**
- Emotions are energy
- Some children need to physically release the emotion in order to calm down
- “Thank you for showing me what your body needs. If you pull my arm like that it hurts. Would pulling help? Here you can pull both arms...”

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**Active & Appropriate Calming**
- Examples:
  - Trampoline
  - Throw cotton balls
  - Kick a mat
  - Swing
  - Run
  - Wagon filled with weight
  - Push a wall/isometrics
  - Blanket wrap

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**Fidget vs. Distractor**
- Allowing a child with busy hands to keep them busy allows for increased focus
- Using the object as an allowable fidget can increase focus and attention
- Letting the object become a distractor makes the tool less useful
- “Distractors” get taken away
- Ideas of items to use:
  - Squeeze toys/stress balls
  - Sensory bracelet
  - Rubbery bracelets
  - Putty/play dough
PRACTICE THE STRATEGIES THROUGHOUT THE DAY

- When is the best time to teach a child how to swim?
  - When they are calm or drowning?
- Have pictures of the strategies posted or on a ring
- Have a calm down area
  - This is not the same as a time out area!
- Practice the strategies often so they know how to use them when they are needed

WAYS TO PRACTICE SELF-REGULATION FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

- The Freeze Game
- Red light – green light
- Sleeping, Sleeping, All the Children are Sleeping. Children pretended to sleep when the circle leader sang, “Sleeping, sleeping, all the children are sleeping.” Once children were pretending to sleep, the circle leader said, “And when they woke up… they were [monkeys]!”
- Drum Beats. Teachers used drum beats to represent different actions that children can do while sitting (e.g., clapping or stomping) or while moving around the room (e.g., walking or dancing)
- Practice a strategy at calendar/group time (can be a helpers job)
- Practice strategies while waiting in line or walking between places

ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES

- Predictable schedules and routines
  - Balance the activities (small vs large, active vs quiet...)
  - Use picture schedules and review them daily
- Transitions
  - How many transitions does a child have to go through each day?
  - How do you prepare children for transitions?
- Directions
  - Do you have their attention?
  - Make sure they are clear and given one step at a time
- Rules
  - Take time to teach and re-teach the rules
  - Post them and review them

RULES

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR AND MENTAL HEALTH: STRATEGIES AND IDEAS

- Communicates a message when a child does not have language.
- Used instead of language by a child who has limited social skills or has learned that challenging behavior will result in meeting his or her needs.
CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR WORKS

- Children engage in challenging behavior because “it works” for them.
- It serves 2 purposes:
  - Child gains access to something or someone
    - i.e., obtain/request
  - Child avoids something or someone
    - i.e., escape/protest

OLD WAY

- General intervention for all behavior problems
- Intervention is reactive
- Focus on behavior reduction
- Quick Fix

NEW WAY

- Intervention matched to purpose of the behavior
- Intervention is proactive
- Focus on teaching new skills
- Long term interventions

ANGRY KIDS

- Anger is a response to pain.
- It’s like a blinking light on the dashboard of your car that tells you something is wrong under the hood
- Anger is a natural human emotion
- A child who acts out may be expressing other emotions through anger.
- Sometimes kids have a good reason to be angry...

STRATEGIES FOR ANGRY KIDS

- Practice calming strategies throughout the day to reduce the overall feelings of anxiety/anger
- Listening for understanding is impossible when a child is “drunk” on anger
- Never reason with an angry child. Instead say, “It sounds like you’re really mad. I want to listen and understand. I will listen when your voice is as calm as mine.”
  - Once the child is able to discuss the anger, listen without reasoning.

SENSEORY ACTIVITIES TO RELEASE ANGER

- Repetitive motion: move energy and thoughts away from angry feelings.
  - Swinging or a rocking chair
  - Repetitive tactile experiences
    - Pouring water, squeezing play dough or painting
    - Try sitting down to model one of these activities with some of the materials when you notice your child becoming angry.
- Physical release
  - Brisk walk, run, jump rope, trampoline
  - Get the air moving:
    - Blowing bubbles or blowing up balloons
    - Take the time to smell pleasant, relaxing fragrances, (peppermint or lavender)
CHILDREN WITH ANXIETY

- We all need a little anxiety…
- Too much though and we get kids who are wound up, distracted, have short attention spans, impulsive, asks many questions, shuts down…
- The brain gets high-jacked and can no longer learn when it is anxious
- Anxiety can be contagious!

WAYS TO SUPPORT ANXIOUS KIDS

- Teach them what their body looks or feels like when it is anxious.
- Teach them the self-regulation and breathing strategies
- Seat them away from peers who are loud or misbehave
- Signal the class before directions are given (flashing the lights, clasping hands, etc.), as well as use visual cues
- Escape Option/Calm Down Pass: If the child becomes overwhelmed, there should be a safe place where he/she can go until nerves have calmed down.

WAYS TO HELP ANXIOUS KIDS

- Muscle relaxation
- Deep breathing exercises
- Engage the 5 senses to pull them back into the present
- Allow them to have “anxiety appointments”
- Encourage them to “try acting as if they are not…”
- Help them identify the feeling and reason
  - Do you think your stomach ache is really because you are anxious about…?
- Help them think of a way to calm down
  - Give options
  - Use picture cards or a reminder board of calm down options

CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION PROBLEMS

- Often are looking around
- Easily distracted
- It’s not that they can’t pay attention… they may not be able to identify what they need to pay the most attention to
- Imagine what it is like for these kids…
- It can often be anxiety that is making it hard for them to focus

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH ATTENTION PROBLEMS

- Strip the environment (only display the “rules” on the wall)
- Provide fidgets
- Rubber bands across chair legs (allows for silent extra movement)
- Peer mentors (equal relationship)
- Engage their brain instead of redirecting them all the time (use cues)
- The Visual Box (they need to SEE their boundaries)
- Fabric for focus (soothes the Amygdala and reconnects the brain hemispheres)
  - Soft side of Velcro, rough side of Velcro, corduroy and silk or satin

CHILDREN WITH MOOD DISORDERS

- The brain and hormones in the body regulate emotions
- When they aren’t working properly it gets difficult to stay in control of your feelings
Supporting Children with Mood Disorders

- Invite them to live in this moment (instead of living in the past, present and future at once)
- Mindfulness activities
- Dream journal (what would you like to dream about tonight)
- Practice labeling the emotions they are feeling, discuss how to cope or handle the feelings
- Sensory activities help to “pull them back” into the present moment

Supporting Children with Social Skills Challenges

- Most of us learn to understand emotion in the context of a social interaction
- We tend to process our emotions in a social context throughout our lives
- Temporarily lowering expectations to a previous level of success will increase emotional regulation and build positive experiences
- Use social stories to teach expectations in a concrete manner

Children with Sensory Issues

- Sensory issues can come up in multiple ways, and in many children
- Children can be sensory seeking or sensory avoidant
- Sensory Processing Disorder is a neurological disorder that is like a virtual traffic jam in the brain.
- We have 7 senses: Touch, Taste, Smell, Hearing, Sight, Vestibular (where you are in space) and Proprioception (sensations from joints, muscles and connective tissues)
- There’s a big difference between “bad behavior” and “sensory overload.”
- Every child’s sensory issues are unique.

Sensory Diet Ideas

- Walking
- Brushing
- Listening to calming music
- Fidgeting with objects
- Desk accommodations
  - band across the legs,
  - fabric under desk,
  - Inflatable cushion,
  - sitting on an exercise ball
- Objects for chewing
- Push-ups and jumping jacks
- Get in touch with nature
- Dance
- Swing
- Spin
- Push and pull
- Carry weight
- Stretching
- Playground and gym opportunities
  - All children need opportunities to move before, during, and after school

Children that struggle with Social Skills

- Social skills are defined as: the child’s knowledge of, and ability to use, a variety of social behaviors that are appropriate to a given interpersonal situation and that are pleasing to others in each situation
- A child’s social competence depends upon a number of factors including the child’s social skills, social awareness, and self-confidence
- May not be able to “read” social situations like their peers
- Usually have difficulty naming and identifying emotions in themselves and others

Supporting Children with Social Skills Challenges

- Be aware of the sensory issues
- Connect how the body feels with what makes it feel better
- Show them what to do and then do it with them
- Break interactions down as they happen to process responses together
- Utilize stories, games, and videos to teach appropriate emotional expression
- Be very concrete
**QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS**

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**WEBSITES FOR SENSORY ISSUES**
- Sensory Smarts
- Sensory Processing Disorder Foundation
  - [http://www.spdfoundation.net/about-sensory-processing-disorder.html](http://www.spdfoundation.net/about-sensory-processing-disorder.html)

**WEBSITE RESOURCES FOR ANGER**
- Angry Birds Lesson
  - [http://thehomeschooler.blogspot.com/2012/02/dont-be-angry-bird.html](http://thehomeschooler.blogspot.com/2012/02/dont-be-angry-bird.html)
- 50 Activities/Lessons for Anger

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**WEBSITES FOR SOCIAL STORIES**
- The Watson Institute:
  - [http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/teacher-resources2.jsp?pageId=2161392240601226415747290](http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/teacher-resources2.jsp?pageId=2161392240601226415747290)
- CSEFEL/TACSEI: [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html)
- Region 2 Digital Lending Library: [http://www.region2library.org/socialstories.htm](http://www.region2library.org/socialstories.htm)

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**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES**
- Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
  - In Schools then Tools for Families (Parent Packet)
- TACSEI
  - [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)
- CSFEL
  - [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/)
- Lifeskills4kids.com.au (free ebook)
- Breathing CD
  - [www.miapsych.com](http://www.miapsych.com)

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**WEBSITES FOR “PRE-MADE” SOCIAL STORIES**
- The Watson Institute:
  - [http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/teacher-resources2.jsp?pageId=2161392240601226415747290](http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/teacher-resources2.jsp?pageId=2161392240601226415747290)
- CSEFEL/TACSEI: [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html)
- Region 2 Digital Lending Library: [http://www.region2library.org/socialstories.htm](http://www.region2library.org/socialstories.htm)

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**VIDEO & MEDIA LINKS**
- Breath Rudiment (Breathing exercise)
- By Evan Scott Lainhart, available on itunes for $0.99
- Marshmellow Test:
  - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ)
- Self-regulation and SR Board:
  - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYNNFUoBFA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYNNFUoBFA)
- Move with Me:
- 3B’s Therapy: [www.3bstherapy.com](http://www.3bstherapy.com)
YOU TUBE CALMING VIDEOS

- Cookie Monster & Calming:
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlNqAzm5agA
- Second Step Calm Down for Older Kids:
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIiZHH92DL0
- Feelings Song:
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsISd1AMNYU
- Children’s Meditation Song:
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVM9JKbIIqU
- Calm the Amygdala:
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zs59guIGDo
- Belly Breathe:
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZbaDOyv1A

RESOURCES:


RESOURCES:

Ways I Can Calm Down

Smell & Cool the Soup
Pretend I have a bowl of soup in my hands. Smell it, then blow to cool it off.

Tuck Like a Turtle
Tuck into a "shell" like a turtle and take 3 deep breaths to slow myself down.

Stuffed Animal Elevator
Lay down and put a stuffed animal on your tummy. Then take deep breaths to make the animal move up and down like an elevator.

Talk about It
Find a safe person and talk to them about what is making you have big feelings.

Strong Like a Stick Limp Like a Noodle
Make your body stiff like a stick. Then relax your muscles to feel limp and wiggly like a cooked spaghetti noodle.

Draw A Picture
Draw a picture of why I am upset and tell a safe person about my picture.

Count Slow & Quiet
By counting slow and quiet I can calm my body and mind so I can make safe choices.

Blow Out the Candle
Put my finger up like a pretend candle. Then take 4 or 5 deep breaths to "blow the candle out"
Ways I Can Calm Down

Blow Bubbles
Blow bubbles, or have someone else blow them and you pop them.

Go for a Walk
Go for a walk. Try to walk all the big feelings out of your body.

Sensory Box
Use your sensory box to help you calm down in a quiet spot.

Eagle Stretch
Put your arms up like eagle's wings and then raise them up and down like an eagle flaps its wings.

Stress Ball
Squeeze a ball while you breathe in and out.

Quiet Spot
Find a quiet spot to sit and relax.

Ask for a Hug
Ask for a hug or to sit with an adult.

Read a Book
Find a book to read and take your mind off what is bothering you.
What Caregivers Do to Help their Students Learn Self Regulation

• Provide stability and consistency
  - Clear rules, limit-setting
  - Predictable routines

• Accept the child’s emotions and emotional responses
  - Emotional outbursts aren’t intentional
  - Everyone is entitled to their emotions

• Identify triggers and use them to teach problem solving

• Talk about your own feelings
  - Model for children how to express and cope with big feelings

• Remember you are a model
  - How do you handle your own emotions?
  - Children learn from what they see adults doing around them
  - CALM YOURSELF FIRST

• Help children be aware of the stages in the build up of tension
  - Offer calm down breaks or support to help diffuse the situation

• Use time out for inappropriate emotional angry outbursts

• Take time to teach the key emotional and social competencies
  - Recognize and understand basic emotional states
  - Self-regulation of emotions
  - Improve peer relations
  - Skills for developing problem-solving

• Encourage children to talk about feelings
  - Don’t give directives (don’t tell them how to feel about something)

• Praise the child’s efforts to regulate their emotions
  - Aggressive and impulsive children receive more negative feedback and less praise, even when they are behaving appropriately

Resource provided by Tracy Schreifels MS, LMFT, Reach-Up Incorporated.