

# Strong feelings

How can parents help their early years child develop the self-regulation skills they need to manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviours? **Annette Rawstrone** has some tips

**Y**our child has just thrown themselves onto the floor because you said no, or they have dissolved into tears because you cut their toast the wrong way. These seemingly ridiculous emotional outbursts can be frustrating and upsetting for both your child and you, but they are a normal stage of development.

## WHAT IS SELF-REGULATION?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage emotions, thoughts and behaviours in response to different situations. In essence, mastering self-regulation allows children to pause, think and respond appropriately rather than acting on impulse. It enables them to cope with challenges and setbacks. This is an important life skill because it helps children learn, behave appropriately, build relationships and become independent.

But your early years child is still developing their self-regulation skills. Babies rely on their caregivers to soothe them when they are upset. Toddlers can struggle to verbalise their frustrations, so stamp their feet, hit or cry out. It takes time, patience and guidance for young children to begin to understand their feelings and learn strategies to manage them.

## ARE THESE 'TANTRUMS'?

Emotional outbursts in young children have traditionally been referred to as 'tantrums', implying that they are deliberate acts of defiance or manipulation. However, there has been a move away from this term because it doesn't accurately reflect what is actually happening.

Instead of viewing these reactions as your child being 'naughty' or 'attention seeking',

it is now recognised that they are a sign that your child's big emotions have overwhelmed their ability to cope. It can be helpful to reframe how you think about these outbursts in order to respond with empathy and patience, rather than annoyance.

## HOW CAN I SUPPORT SELF-REGULATION?

Responding with empathy to your child's strong emotions does not mean allowing them to do what they choose and never saying no in attempt to prevent them from getting upset. Children need boundaries and showing how to express their emotions in a more regulated way.

- Be their 'safe haven': Try to stay calm and offer reassurance when your child is having an outburst. Remember that you are their 'safe haven' and that your child needs reassurance when they are distressed – 'I understand that you don't want to get out of the bath because you're having fun. But it's time to get your pyjamas on.'
- Label and validate emotions: By giving your child the correct language, they can then learn to express themselves better and make sense of their experiences. For example, 'You're feeling frustrated because your bricks fell down.' And instead of saying, 'It's fine, don't be silly', try, 'I know you're upset and that's OK.' You can validate your child's feelings even if you don't agree with their behaviour.
- Model self-regulation: Your child will observe and mirror those around them, so if you are quick to lose your temper and shout then they will see it as acceptable. Instead, acknowledge that you are feeling annoyed and let them

## Be their 'safe haven': Try to stay calm and offer reassurance when your child is having an outburst

see that you are taking a deep breath or counting to ten before responding.

- Teach calming strategies: Help them to take deep breaths and slowly exhale or squeeze a soft toy when they are starting to feel frustrated. Enable them to retreat to a quite space when they are feeling overwhelmed, and be ready with a reassuring cuddle. Allow them to practise self-regulation skills in everyday situations.
- Provide predictability and routine: Giving advance notice of transitions, such as telling your child that they will need to get their coat on for nursery in five minutes, or that it will soon be time to wash hands before dinner, can help prevent emotional overwhelm.
- Encourage problem-solving: Give your child space to think through challenges and come up with their own solutions before you step in to help. This can help them to build the skills to navigate conflicts independently and to persevere instead of giving up.



## WHEN DO I GET ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

Remember that all children are different and some have more intense emotions than others. Recognising and respecting your child's temperament can help you to tailor your approach, but learning self-regulation takes time and effort, so be patient and supportive.

If you feel your child is struggling to develop self-regulation skills and their emotional responses are interfering with their daily routines, then reach out to your child's key worker, health visitor or GP. Self-regulation is complex, and some children – and adults – benefit from being supported with additional strategies.