



THE
**Calm Kids Guide to
Emotional Regulation**



PARENTS
with confidence



The Comprehensive Guide to Skyrocket Your Child's Emotional Regulation

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A large part of this guide will address specific strategies and insights for helping your child to better regulate their emotions, but before we get there, it's important you understand *why* supporting your child with their emotions goes far beyond 'what to do when my child is upset or having a meltdown'.

First, it's imperative to have a solid grasp of the overarching umbrella of emotional intelligence (emotion regulation is a subset of this) and the significance it holds for your child's emotional and social well-being.



Let's be honest- for most people raising an emotionally intelligent child likely did not top the list of parenting priorities when you imagined what life with kids would look like.

This isn't all that surprising really, given the fact that anything even remotely relating to the subject of emotions has not only been placed at the bottom of the totem pole by previous generations but has actively been avoided.

As a mental health professional, when I look around at skyrocketing rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, self-harm and beyond (in both older and younger generations), it's not hard to see a direct correlation with the lack of focus and emphasis on understanding and relating to our emotions as humans.

We live in a time where we're fortunate enough to have access to research and resources that indicate what will greatly benefit a child's lifelong happiness, satisfaction and well-being.



With the next generation, we can change the way emotional health is viewed and start turning the tides on maladaptive coping strategies and the steady climb of *nearly every mental health condition*.

While the focus of parenting in the early days of your child's life may have been to help them *survive*, I believe just as much emphasis in the following years should be put into helping your child *thrive*.

When it comes to helping your child thrive out in the world, building the skills of emotional intelligence is the most powerful thing you can do for them.

Why?

Understanding our own emotions and the emotions of others is the building block of every social and emotional skill needed for healthy and fulfilling relationships and careers, which is echoed in recent research on the powerful impacts of EQ (Emotional intelligence).

Essentially, when you give your child strong emotional intelligence skills, you give them a working framework for interacting positively with themselves and others in any situation or environment!

Talk about a superpower!

Ever since psychologist Daniel Goleman has brought the concept of emotional intelligence into the forefront in 1995 there have been decades of research indicating what a huge determinate emotional intelligence is on a person's relationships and overall quality of life.

While we all have unique hopes, dreams, and goals for our families, most of us would agree that without our mental health and meaningful relationships with those we love, all the other stuff tends to fade into the background.

I'm not going to lose any sleep over my 8-year-old forgetting a homework assignment or not getting top-notch grades. I'm also ok if she isn't in club soccer, the captain of her volleyball team or reading at the highest level (of course these things can be wonderful for a child).

What I will lose sleep over, is my child struggling to cope with anxiety, letting her anger out on her friends, or not knowing how to handle bullying at school.

When you take the time to teach and model emotional intelligence with your child, you're providing the tools for healthy life-long relationships with themselves, schoolmates, friends, future co-workers, and future spouses (just to name a few).

Let's start by learning exactly what emotional intelligence really is and how it's different from emotion regulation.

Chapter One: Emotional Regulation vs Emotional Intelligence

Now you have an idea of the vast importance of supporting your child's relationship with their emotions, but what exactly does emotional intelligence mean anyway?

Emotional Intelligence is the broad term defined as the ability to recognize, understand and manage our own emotions, as well as understanding the emotions of others.

For your child this means having an awareness of what emotions are occurring within themselves as well as being able to identify and work through these emotions in both a personal and relational context.



Emotional intelligence encompasses many things including the ability to:

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- be aware of and identify the emotions you're experiencing

- understand why an emotion may be occurring
 - allow your emotions to exist
 - tolerate uncomfortable emotions
 - express emotions in a healthy way
 - use self-control when it comes to our emotions
 - understand the emotions another person may be experiencing
 - allowing others to express emotions
 - responding appropriately to others emotions
 - show and demonstrate empathy
 - better understand others
-

This term emotional intelligence was coined in 1990 by Peter Salovey and John D Mayer who were researchers on emotions and the brain at Yale. The term was then popularized when Daniel Goleman expanded upon their research and wrote a book about it, specifically noting that it was not cognitive intelligence that guaranteed later success in life but emotional intelligence.

He also observed that emotionally intelligent people had the following four characteristics:

They were good at understanding their own emotions (self-awareness)

They were good at managing their emotions (self-management)

They were empathetic to the emotional drives of other people (social awareness)

They were good at handling other people's emotions (social skills)

Essentially, emotional intelligence means being comfortable with all things.... emotions!

So where does emotional regulation fit into that picture?

Emotional intelligence is often confused with emotional regulation, but the difference is easier to understand when we picture emotional intelligence as a broad concept, and emotional regulation as a smaller subset concept that falls under it.

Emotional regulation relates more specifically to understanding the way our body and brain manifests stress and how to properly manage this.

Self-regulation is defined as the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of a situation.

It's a set of skills that enables your child to inhibit their emotional or behavioral responses and direct their behavior towards a goal, such as making it till the end of the birthday party for the cake to be served or not hitting their friend so as to have an enjoyable play date.

Essentially, a child's emotional regulation skills boil down to how they manage incoming and outgoing stress.

Research consistently shows that self-regulation is necessary for social-emotional and academic success and well-being and is one of the most important skills for our child to develop.

We'll dive more into how exactly you can support your child's developing self-regulation skills later in the guide, but first let's make sure you have a firm grasp of the umbrella of awesomeness that is emotional intelligence!

Chapter Two: Improving your Child's Emotional Intelligence skills

If you're feeling overwhelmed or frustrated that teaching the skills of EI haven't been at the forefront of your parenting journey thus far, don't sweat it. The great news is... emotional intelligence can be learned and now is a better time than ever to start teaching your child how to engage in healthy ways with their emotions. Hooray!

Before we get into the HOW let's get a firm grasp on a few key principles behind fostering emotional intelligence.

There are a few general things to keep in mind when it comes to having the best mindset for supporting your child's emotional regulation skills.

There are no bad emotions

There is perhaps nothing more universal among humans than our emotions. Studies have shown that across cultures and regions we all have a set of basic emotions as a shared component of our experience.

Our feelings are a part of us, and to shut ourselves off from certain emotions is to shut off a part of ourselves! This is precisely why when you dismiss your child's emotions it has the very real effect of feeling like you're dismissing them.

Yet from a young age, children learn that uncomfortable feelings such as anger and jealousy seem to be off-limits and even looked at negatively by adults. This leads to patterns of denying and avoiding emotions, which is a slippery slope toward anxiety and depression.



You can turn the tides of this pattern by affirming that all of your child's feelings are normal and healthy.

I know. When your child expresses big emotions it makes you uncomfortable...(or VERY uncomfortable) and that's OK (remember all emotions are OK). Notice when you're feeling triggered by their emotions and fight the urge to shut down your child's emotional expression by repeating "all feelings are ok".

Making this mentality switch is going to be the biggest game-changer when it comes to navigating a new healthier relationship with emotions in your family.

Emotions come and go (IF we cope with them successfully)

Did you know that emotions are caused by actual chemical reactions in your brain and body? Even more surprising is that if you were to simply allow your emotional response to happen and then dissipate, it would typically take around 90 seconds.

Yes, you read that correctly. If you're wondering when the last time you had an emotion for only 90 seconds was, you're not alone. As humans, we've gotten really good at inadvertently finding ways to keep our emotions hanging around.

The biggest reason behind this is avoidance. We aren't comfortable with our emotions from a lack of understanding, so we avoid them at all costs.

If you were asked to list out your go-to coping strategies when stressed or overwhelmed at the end of a long night of parenting, the list might range from binge eating your child's stale Halloween candy all the way to numbing out in front of 3 hours of Netflix.

Emotions are a lot less overwhelming when we learn they will come and go within 90 seconds. No emotion will last forever, the trick is making space to honor them so they can safely pass on through.

The next time your child is in the middle of a full-on meltdown, remind yourself "these episodes won't last forever"

The power of modeling

Hands down, the most powerful lessons your children will learn about coping with their emotions will come from watching the adults in their lives. While this may feel like a lot of responsibility, it's a hopeful one. If your child struggles with their intense emotions it can be extremely frustrating to watch. You feel helpless, overwhelmed and frustrated.

Remember, although you may feel helpless, you're not. While you can't control your child's intense emotions you can most certainly control yours.

Focusing on your own relationship with emotions will be exponentially more effective than trying to control theirs. Taking on this challenge can bring up a lot of subconscious activity (emotions, memories, unhelpful thoughts) for you, so it's important to be aware of this and to take time to reflect on the following things:

Was open expression of emotion tolerated when I was young?

Did my caregivers empathize with my emotions?

How were expressions of anger or sadness met in my family?

Am I unintentionally passing on unhealthy messages about emotion to my child?

What unhealthy coping strategies do I need to let go of?

Am I modeling the coping skills I aim to teach my child?

Keeping these principles in mind as you proceed on your journey to support your child with their emotional expression will help you stay on track without getting overwhelmed. Beyond manifesting the former principles, there are many research-backed strategies you can put into place with your child that will help them to sow the seeds of emotional health.

Emotion Coaching

A renowned therapist named John Gottman has done a ton of research on teaching children emotional intelligence and more specifically, ways that parents can either support their child's EI, or undermine it.

In his research he looked at how parents generally respond to their child's expressions of emotions and found four consistent patterns in the ways parents would react:

Dismissing Parents see children's emotions as unimportant and attempts to eliminate them quickly, often through the use of distraction.

Disapproving Parents see negative emotions as something to be squashed, usually through punishment.

Laissez-Faire Parents accept all emotions from a child, but fail to help the child solve problems or put limits on appropriate behaviors.

Emotion-Coaching Parents value negative emotions, are not impatient with a child's expression of them and use emotional experience as an opportunity for bonding by offering guidance through labeling emotions and problem-solving the issue at hand.



Take heart that in his research, Gottman found that 'emotion coaching parents' were not perfect and didn't always respond with the respective steps of emotion coaching. They did,

however, have a goal to aim for and did their best to respond positively to their child's emotions.

His research also showed that emotion coaching was highly powerful. Children who had 'emotion coaching' parents were physically healthier, emotionally healthier, were performing better in school and had more successful peer and family relationships. Emotional intelligence is so powerful!

Teaching the skills to engage positively with big emotions is going to be a huge asset for your child that generally feels very deeply and expresses those feelings very intensely!

How to teach your child emotional intelligence skills

Gottman created 5 steps of being an emotion coach that are straight and to the point:

1. Be aware of your child's emotion
2. Recognize your child's expression of emotion as a perfect moment for intimacy and teaching
3. Listen with empathy and validate your child's feelings
4. Help your child learn to label their emotions with words
5. Set limits when you are helping your child to solve problems or deal with upsetting situations appropriately

While this is a great general jumping-off point, there is much more that goes into laying the groundwork for your child's emotional intelligence. Let's talk about 6 ways you can nurture your child's emotional intelligence each and every day in a bit more detail.

6 Ways to Nurture your Child's EI

As a parent, you have the opportunity (and privilege) to model and encourage the qualities of emotional intelligence in your child's everyday life. Here are 7 ways to start today.

1. Change your story around emotion.

Emotions are not the bad guy. In fact, they are the exact opposite. Your child very much needs to experience a healthy array of emotions throughout their day, so it's time to cozy up and become BFF's with your child's big feelings. Emotions serve your child in so many ways, cueing them in when they're overwhelmed, tired, in danger, or in need of help.

Resist the urge to minimize emotions that may challenge your child such as anger ("calm down!"), sadness ("stop crying") or hurt ("you're fine"), as it robs them of the healthy opportunity of learning how to sit with and manage the emotion. The goal of changing 'your story' with emotion is to normalize your child's emotions for yourself...so you can, in turn, normalize emotion for them. Life works so much better when you work with your emotions and not against them.

It's hard to see your child struggle but if they aren't able to acknowledge and navigate their emotional landscape now, it will impact their mental health and future relationships later.



2.View moments of emotional expression as opportunities.

When you start to view your child's intense emotions as opportunities to partner with them in developing life-long skills to aid in all areas of their life, it will allow you to show up as a supportive presence with them. Instead of going straight to 'reactivity mode' and trying to bring everything to halt as fast as possible, notice your child's emotion and give it space to breathe and just be for a moment.

3.Listen and validate your child's emotions.

Give your child your full attention while you listen to their emotional expression. Reflect back what you hear, thus telling your child you understand what they are seeing and experiencing.

If your child is younger, you may need to help them identify the emotions they are experiencing, generally visuals are the best tool for this. For an older child, you can ask

them how they're feeling or offer your observations depending on how your child's responds best. "It looks like you are really angry right now".

4. Teach your child a wide emotional vocabulary.

When you teach a variety of emotion words they will have an easier time both identifying and expressing their feelings. After all, emotions need to be identified before they can be worked through! Often young children don't have the words they need to describe the feeling they're experiencing! Putting the right emotion word to their experience is the first and essential step in them working through the emotion.

It's actually been proven that when we verbally acknowledge an emotion we're experiencing, it actually sets off a series of neurotransmitters that act as a calming agent to the nervous system. Crazy right?!

5. Practice healthy ways to express emotion with them.

Practice different coping strategies together, what works will change with age, circumstance, and environment (we'll go deeper into this in the next section on self-regulation).

All emotions are acceptable but all behaviors are not. Help your child cope with his or her emotions by setting safe/healthy limits on their emotional expression and developing problem-solving skills around exploring appropriate means to express their emotions. This involves helping your child reflect on what hasn't worked/what has and what they're willing to try moving forward.

6. Model emotional intelligence skills for your child

When it comes to teaching your child emotional intelligence the way you live will be your biggest asset. There are endless opportunities in daily life to model the skills you seek to teach your child such as identifying your emotions, accepting them, verbalizing them out loud, and engaging a coping strategy.

Through acknowledging and labeling the emotions of others as well, you'll be teaching them empathy in a very powerful way.

"I'm convinced that when we help our children find healthy ways of dealing with their feelings--ways that don't hurt them or anyone else--we're helping to make our world a safer better place."-Fred Rogers

Chapter Three: The Journey of Emotional Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of a situation.

It's a set of skills that enables your child to inhibit their emotional or behavioral responses and direct their behavior towards a goal, such as making it till the end of the birthday party for the cake to be served or not hitting their friend so as to have an enjoyable playdate.

Essentially, a child's emotional regulation skills boil down to how they manage incoming and outgoing *stress*.

[Research](#) consistently shows that self-regulation is necessary for social-emotional *and* academic success and well-being and is one of the most important skills for your child to develop.



When it comes to your child's self-regulation, it's helpful to know that you've unknowingly been helping them to regulate since the day they were born!

Whether you knew it or not, many of the actions and routines in place when your child was an infant were for the purpose of managing your child's 'arousal states' because they were not capable of doing so on their own, due to an immature nervous system (think rocking, bouncing, shhhh'ing etc)

The hard truth.

While your child is older now and has gained many skills that enable self-regulation in certain situations or environments, *they are still largely dependent on you to help them scaffold (gradually build) these skills!*

The path of self-regulation can be a bit more linear for some children, but children with certain temperament characteristics (for example high activity level, variable moods, and high or low sensory thresholds) will need more support and guidance to build a strong foundation of self-regulation.

5 Step Framework for self-regulation

Step 1: Model positive emotional regulation skills for your child.

When it comes to your child's self-regulation you'd only be kidding yourself if you considered the only focus to be your child.

How you as a parent learn and model how to manage your stress level is going to be the first step in the process of supporting your child's self-regulation skills. You learning to manage your stress level has everything to do with how you'll be able to show up for your child with a calm and attentive presence.

Ever since your child was born you've been helping your child to process the world and regulate their nervous systems through a complicated system known as the 'inter-brain'. This is essentially a bunch of neurons creating a channel for communication that allows your child to connect with you through touch, sound, vision and shared emotion. This 'neurological circuitry' continues to connect and wire your child's brain throughout their life! How amazing is that?

If you're looking back on your child's infancy or early years and thinking "oh great, I've missed all this important time", *don't stress*.

Your child can gain powerful emotional regulation skills at any age but it all starts with you.

Your ability to regulate your emotions and behaviors will be a powerful teacher for your child on many levels.

Step 2: Become a stress detective

All children have particular situations, environments or sensations that create excessive stress for them, whether it be the common scenarios of lack of sleep and hunger or more particular things such as sensitivity to loud noises or transitioning away from electronic devices.

Remember, your child's behaviors are always communicating a need. Better understanding your child's stress triggers will only be possible if you're able to de-personalize their behavior and look at it objectively.

A huge part of noticing when your child may be under stress is through observing when and where they present challenging behaviors such as whining, defiance or emotional meltdowns. These behaviors are all 'stress clues'.

Helping your child cultivate an awareness of what consistently causes stress for them builds important skills of emotional regulation and empowers you both to prepare ahead of time for greater success.

'Thorns' and 'anger buttons' are two words I use often with my young therapy clients to refer to common themes, situations, or places where our anger tends to pop up most frequently.

Helping your child reflect on what things usually happen before 'their anger comes out' is a powerful way to cultivate self-awareness and become better prepared for when tricky situations reoccur in the future.



Step 3: Identify your child's stressors

It can be helpful to break down stressors into different categories to get you thinking about what specific factors may be influencing your child's stress level. When you're able to zero in on what exactly is causing your child stress when they are unable to manage their

behavior and emotions, you'll be on your way to the next important step, reducing those stressors.

Biological

For this one, think in general about the body. Going a bit more in-depth, it includes your child's nervous system as well as other physiological processes that use energy throughout the day.

Some areas in this domain are nutrition, sleep, exercise, sensory stimuli (smells, tastes, touch, etc), physical illness/injury, etc.

Any physical sensation will be under the biological domain.

Emotional

This one is pretty straight forward, but essentially stressors in this category related to intense emotions and the limited ability to navigate them. Because of a child's challenges in processing through emotions, it can serve as a big energy drain, and therefore becomes a stressor.

Cognitive

Mental processes make up your child's cognitive domain. These processes include memory, processing information, reasoning, problem-solving, etc. If a child is more easily distracted, struggles with their working memory or can't shift their attention when necessary, this causes them stress.

Social

How your child adapts and reacts in social situations falls under the social domain. This includes understanding social cues, communication skills, and handling conflict. If a child struggles to make friendships, or engage positively in social settings it becomes an area of stress.

Step 4: Reducing your child's stressors

Once you become aware of the specific areas in which your child is under excessive stress you can begin the magical work of either 1) reducing, or 2) eliminating those stressors for them!

If your child is struggling with a particular domain, you can offer them skills and support to help empower them during those times. This will be crucial for essential areas that clearly can't be avoided such as social settings and interactions.

If your child has a more specific stressor, you may be able to eliminate it altogether. An example would be a child who wakes up cranky every morning. Simply addressing their nutritional concerns including the intake of proper protein etc may be sufficient to alleviate the challenges.

Step 5: Guide your child in self-awareness

Once you familiarize yourself with dialing in on your child's stressors and applying problem-solving to eliminate them when you're able, you can begin to work with your child in helping them learn this process as well!

There are many ways to do this that will feel organic to your child/family/situation but here are a few general approaches to keep in mind:

Empower your child with knowledge.

In my therapy practice, I teach my kiddos about their brain using the [hand model](#) from Dr. Dan Siegel which breaks down the neuroscience of their emotions in a simple way by looking at the upstairs brain (thinking) and the downstairs (emotional brain) and how our thinking brain goes offline when our emotions are running high.

This is the brain's typical and healthy response to stress so it's important to normalize this for them, as the feeling of being 'out of control' can be disconcerting and anxiety-provoking for many kids.

After we familiarize with brain basics we talk about the bodies 'anger warning signs'. How do your emotions manifest physically in your body? Do your palms get sweaty? Maybe you notice your heart pounding? Helping kids notice the physiological signs of anger is the first step in promoting concrete internal signals that promote self-awareness.



Teach the basics of emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence is defined as the ability to recognize, understand and manage our own emotions and the emotions of others.

Emotional intelligence concepts are a huge part of emotional regulation and square one is making sure your child has a wide emotional vocabulary. Identifying emotions is the first step to working through them, so teaching kids that there are MANY different emotions and labels for various emotions, allows them to take the first step of working through them.

Using visual tools is a great way to do this, check out my emotions for kids bundle for toddlers through early elementary ages to help kids learn to manage their emotions.

Body warning signs

A huge part of supporting a child's emotional regulation skills is helping them to develop self-awareness around their body's physical reactions to anger.

If your child can pay attention to their body's physiological signs of anger they can implement calming tools and strategies before their anger gets the best of them.

Help them explore how they feel anger in their body when having an anger outburst. Does their face get hot and flushed? Do they tense up their muscles or hold their breath? These are powerful clues to help your child deal with anger (Here's an example and a list of the best anger management activities for kids).

Explore coping strategies together.

The next step after identifying the emotion is helping them find healthy and productive outlets for their intense emotions.

Every child's nervous system and sensory system is unique, so it is realistic to expect a LOT of trial and error, and to also expect that what works will change over time!

A few questions to get you thinking about what soothes your child: Is there a particular space your child finds calming? Where do they run when upset or frustrated? Do they seem

to calm with physical touch or appear to avoid it? Do they prefer to be around others or respond better to quiet solitude?

Use visuals

When your child is in the heat of an angry moment, visuals are going to be your best friend. Due to what's happening in their brain during emotional upheaval it's much easier for your child to visually process information when they're upset than processing *what you say* auditorily.

Their thinking brain is shut down so the more basic the intervention ("I see you're upset, let's grab the calm down basket"), the better it will be accepted by your child and actually work.

This emotions flashcard bundle is a great tool for this!

Mindfulness and breathing practice.

First off, our bodies and minds are inextricably linked so some very simple things parents can do off the top to help a child with self-regulation are keeping consistent routines, meals, and bedtimes which all boost your child's emotional regulation skills.

There is a lot of research showing us the power of taking good quality breaths and how this soothes and calms our nervous system. It's the first thing I teach kids in my therapy practice. In order for our child to seek out a state of calm, *they need to know how it feels to be calm.*

There is so much research on mindfulness and its ability to regulate our emotions and behaviors by strengthening our prefrontal cortex (the part of our brain that shuts down when your child is upset).

Incorporating simple mindfulness practices into the day goes a long way to keep your child's baseline emotional arousal level lower in addition to giving them an amazing calming strategy they can use anywhere at any time.

Chapter 4: Managing Meltdowns 101

Before we can talk about the most helpful ways to support your child when they are in the midst of a full-blown meltdown, it's important you have a good understanding of what's happening in your child's brain when are in a highly emotional state. Let's talk about 3 basic but extremely important brain/body systems and how they impact your child when emotions are running high.

When picturing these areas of the brain, visualize them as an upside-down pyramid. Our brains develop in a 'bottom to top' manner, meaning that the primitive structures are developed/activated first in order for the higher levels of brain development/function to take place.

We'll start with the bottom of the pyramid (the tip because remember it's upside-down).

Brain Stem

The brain stem is the lowest, oldest and most primitive part of the brain, and the one which develops first. It's responsible for controlling basic survival mechanisms such as heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure, among others. This is the part of your child's brain that holds the primary role of *keeping them alive*, which means it's always scanning the environment for possible threats or danger.

Our brains were designed to prioritize survival, so while thousands of years ago a perceived threat may have been rustling in the bushes nearby (oh no a tiger!), in today's world a perceived threat might look like an angry parent or teacher.

When your child is extremely emotionally dysregulated, they are operating out of their lower brain area/brain stem and *will not be able to engage* in any of the following functions enabled by the next two systems.



Limbic System

The limbic system is the next system above the brain stem which is also largely designed to keep us safe. It is, however, more complex than the brain stem and houses structures including the hippocampus (memory) and the amygdala (emotion). The limbic system is very very powerful in humans as evidenced by decades of studies on the universality of emotions.

The limbic system structures are highly interactive and are responsible for creating a sense of emotional safety, connection and well-being. When your child is operating from their limbic system they are moderately dysregulated and will be *largely unable* to engage in higher brain functions which are housed in the next part of the pyramid.

Cerebral Cortex

The cerebral cortex is the fancy schmansy part of the brain responsible for higher functions including logic, reason, abstract thought, working memory, planning, problem-solving, self-control etc. This is the part of our brain that differentiates us from animals and other species, as it equips us for higher thinking.

When your child is functioning out of their cerebral cortex (you'll often hear me refer to this as the pre-frontal cortex which is a more specific part of the cerebral cortex) they'll be fully engaged in the world around them, having the greatest awareness of their actions and emotions. This is the precise brain state you want your child to be in, when you want to teach or work with them in any way shape or form!

The takeaway

Telling your child to "calm down" is not going to do a lick of good in helping your child regain regulation of their emotions and behavior, their brain has other plans.

If your child's lower-level brain functions are engaged and they are in a 'stress state', they will not have access to their higher-level brain functions. Period. In order for a child to be emotionally regulated and calm *all three* of the aforementioned brain areas must be working together or what Dr. Dan Siegel refers to as *integrated*.

Why do you need to know this?

You are not expected to walk away today as a neuroscientist, but you do need to understand that the way you've been approaching your child's tantrums, meltdowns and full-blown explosions has been *backward*.



When your child is highly emotional what do you focus on? I have three guesses. Their behavior, and their behavior and their behavior. You get sucked into the arguing, yelling, hitting and stomping without realizing that these are only symptoms of a deeper process underneath.

In order to successfully intervene with your child during a meltdown, you have to see beneath the behavior and understand that there is a very natural and even healthy coping/survival response happening in the brain.

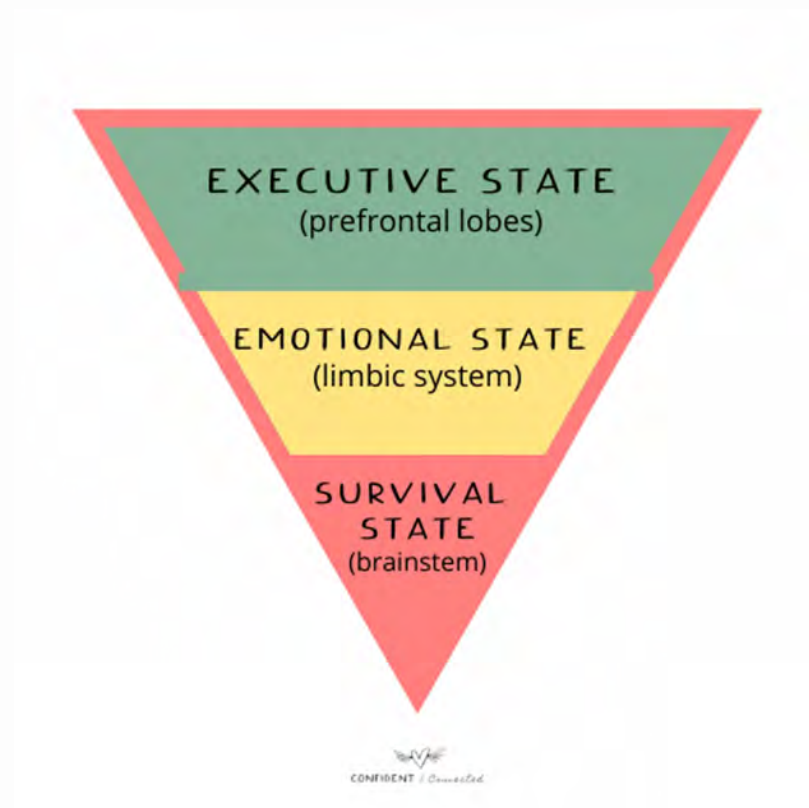
Of course, it's important to observe your child's behavior with the goal of observing when their stress levels may be getting high or if they have unmet needs that need to be addressed.

However, what you don't want to do is fixate on and get stuck in their behaviors, becoming so reactive and wrapped up in them that you can't see the bigger picture.

Now let's put it all together in a way that will allow you to respond most effectively to a highly emotional child.

The Internal States Model

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us through his extensive research, that before we can expect a child to learn, think and reflect (which requires an executive state), we first need to make sure a child's needs for physical and emotional safety are met (survival and emotional states).



In it's simplest form, this model of intervening with an emotionally escalated child can be conceptualized into 3 different steps: Regulate, Relate, Reason.

Regulate

The absolute first thing you should do when intervening with your upset child is help them to soothe and calm their nervous system, which is sounding an alarm in the form of fight/flight/freeze. The first priority is making sure your child is safe. After the child is deemed to be safe, the next step is alleviating all extra stimuli meaning, the less talking, noise or stimulation of any kind, the better.

Your child needs to re-establish 'emotional grounding' and allow all of the physiological processes triggered by their limbic system (rapid heart rate, stress hormone spike, blood pressure spike etc) to dissipate and subside.

The biggest thing you can do to help your child during this stage is to stay calm and focus on regulating your own emotions.

Simply let your child know you're available to them if need be, and gauge how you can best be a supportive physical presence without being overwhelming or frightening.

Relate

After your child is out of survival mode, the next thing you can do to intervene is providing them with emotional attunement and connection. Reasoning still won't work at this stage. It's all about helping to emotionally soothe your child and you are the best person to meet this need.

The biggest thing you can do to help your child during this stage is to provide a calm and soothing presence, offer physical affection and let them know they are safe and that you can see they're upset.



Connect with your child in whatever ways they are most receptive to at that moment.

Reason

Your child has calmed down and is now in their 'executive state' and has regained the ability to understand what happened and how they may have handled the situation in a better way.

The biggest thing you can do to help your child in this stage is to identify and validate their emotions, confidently reinforce your limit (or the principle you want to teach) and discuss/problem-solve around solutions for the situation in the future.

This is the brain state necessary for helping your child to reflect on their actions, as well as think critically about how they could handle the situation more positively next time.

A Neurodevelopmental approach for the win!

Now that you've discovered what's really happening beneath the surface when your child's emotions are heightened, you can re-evaluate the way you've been approaching or intervening with their big behaviors.

It's time to take a close look at the way you've been approaching your child in 'high emotion' situations and decide if it's rooted in what you now know about the brain and bodies regulatory responses, or if you were simply approaching them out of *your own escalated emotion state*.

We are so fortunate to live in a time where we have this research and knowledge! Instead of banging your head against a brick wall of "calm down's!", this neurodevelopmental model allows you to understand the brain/body states your child is in when they're engaging in certain behaviors so you can most effectively intervene. With this awareness, you can learn not only to help your child better manage their thoughts and emotions but also to better manage your own!

Only when your child is calm and regulated can they really understand/process and internalize/remember what you're teaching them.

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Resources:

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