



Self-Regulation for Pupils

A guide for school staff

Self-regulation is the ability to tolerate our emotions, and to understand and manage our personal responses. Children can show a variety of behavioural reactions to stress or anxiety. Stress is a normal human response to feeling unsafe, experiencing unpredictability, uncertainty or pressure. Although stress is a natural part of the human experience, it is likely to be heightened at times of crisis or prolonged trauma, which can make it more difficult to tolerate.

Some children can communicate that they are overwhelmed, exhausted or anxious through their behaviour if they are unable to say how they are feeling. They may show that they need space to calm down by retreating under a table, clearing their belongings off of the table, covering their ears or shouting. Often, an overwhelmed child can appear angry, defiant or aggressive.

It is important to have realistic expectations of children's ability to be aware of and regulate their thoughts, feelings and emotions. We need to teach children to try to make choices about their behaviour that are safe, fair and lead to good feelings for themselves and others (for younger children refer to the [Incredible Years programme](#)). It takes time for young children to learn the awareness and skills involved in self-regulation and this is part of a developmental process that continues throughout adolescence and young adulthood.

The Regulate, Relate, Reason Model (Dr Bruce Perry)

As teachers, there are a number of things you can do to support pupils who may be feeling anxious or stressed. The Regulate, Relate, Reason Model is a useful model to draw upon to help a pupil to develop strategies to self-regulate.

Research has shown that children who are stressed and anxious find it very difficult to use parts of the brain that allow them to engage in social interaction or think things through. Until a pupil is regulated (feeling physically and emotionally calm) they will find it very difficult to engage with an adult. Pupils also need to feel comfortable and connected to an adult. A problem solving framework is provided in **Appendix 1** which will help them work through a specific problem and find suitable solutions.

Regulate

- **Regulate your own stress and try to be calm and confident in your response.** Teachers who are calm and use a quiet tone of voice are more likely to promote similar behaviours and feelings in their pupils. **See Appendix 2** for more information on a self – reflection guide for staff.
- **Include frequent movement and rhythm breaks into the school day** Movement and rhythm are helpful in class and lead to more effective thinking and learning amongst pupils.



- **Have a structured and predictable classroom and follow regular routines.** A sense of predictability helps pupils feel safe and provides a sense of stability. For younger children it helps to provide a daily visual schedule to which you regularly refer.
- **Break assignments into manageable segments.** Tasks should have a clear beginning and end so that the pupil perceives success is possible.
- **Allow pupils to take time away to regulate themselves** by creating a quiet area in the classroom that they can go to if they feel overwhelmed. This could consist of a small tent for younger children or some soft furnishings.
- **Step back if you need to and if it is safe to do so.**

Relate

- **Actively involve the pupils in the lessons** and provide choices whenever possible to give them a sense of control. This empowers pupils and reduces the chances they will seek control and power through oppositional behaviours.
- **Demonstrate empathy and understand the function of behaviour.** Validate the pupil's feelings with your words and tone of voice. Use short sentences such as *"I know you feel upset right now, this is very hard"*. Your focus here is connecting with the pupil.
- **Understand the impact that anxiety and stress has on your pupils.** Pupils who experience stress can have difficulty regulating their emotions, thoughts and behaviours and may be aggressive, impulsive, or require additional attention.

Reason

- **Once the pupil is calm,** you can talk to them about alternatives to their behaviours.
- **Develop an understanding and ability to express emotions safely.** Feelings are normal and helpful responses that tell us how we are and keep us safe. Children need to know that they can learn to recognise and manage their emotions and that they have choices about how they can express their feelings and what they do about them. Sometimes it's difficult to know if we are *mad or sad* or both. We can actually be scared or worried when we show anger. Metaphors can be helpful to describe a feeling e.g. anger can be described as a *bodyguard emotion that tries to protect us*.
- **Validate your pupil's concerns and normalise their reactions.** Let pupils know that what they are feeling is okay and it is helpful to talk about how they are feeling. You can reassure them that anxiety is normal and something they can cope with.



- **Help pupils to label their emotions**

An important aspect of self-regulation is to recognise and name our emotions. Teachers can model and normalise a range of emotions by giving pupils opportunities to express themselves in nonverbal ways. For younger children this could include drawing a picture about how their day is going. Using visuals can also be helpful because they do not rely on language.

- **Develop self-awareness**

When pupils are calm they can be taught about the brain and the stress response. The following visuals have been adapted from the work of Karen Treisman (2019) and they display some of the different responses to stress:



Attack
like a
shark

Retreat into
my tortoise
shell

Put up my
spikes like a
hedgehog



Go into
my own
bubble

Zoom away
like a
speeding car

Make
myself
invisible

You can invite them to think about what might help them when they become stressed or anxious and teach them to signal or say that they are getting stressed and need help calming down.



- **Helping pupils to link thoughts, feelings and behaviours**

This can help them make sense of overwhelming experiences. This can be done through the use of visuals, puppets or toys, drawing, talking, drama etc. **The thinking triangle** (below) can be used to support pupils to recognise the link between their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. You can ask the pupil to name the situation first, and then to identify their associated thoughts/ feelings/ behaviours. Thoughts are words or pictures in your head and feelings are the emotions you feel e.g. happiness, sadness, anxiety, worry and anger.



- **Using coping self-talk**

This involves teaching and supporting pupils to tell themselves affirmative, hopeful and self-soothing statements in their heads such as: *“I can calm down. This feeling will pass by. I can try again when I feel ready.”*

- **Help pupils to identify coping skills and strategies.**

Pupils need explicit teaching to help them to regulate their emotions and manage stress. You could invite a pupil to make a list of the objects and activities that might be calming and helpful to them in regulating their emotions and behaviours the next time they are stressed. Pupils can be supported to develop their self-regulation skills by using meditation, breathing exercises, and mindfulness practices that provide them with time to pause and reflect on their thoughts and emotions. Teaching pupils to recognize their thoughts and emotions, and pause, and process them before acting on them builds coping skills and reduces the need to address behavioural difficulties in the classroom. Additional information and strategies are provided in the **Appendix 3**.





Appendix 1: Problem-Solving Plan

1. What is the problem?



2. What could I do?



Think of lots of possible different ideas.



| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|

3. What might happen for each of these ideas?



or



| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|

4. Tick the best solution...



5. Do it! Put your plan into action!



6. Did it work? Think about what went well and what you could do differently next time



or



Appendix 2: Self-Reflection Guide for Staff



The following is a self-reflection guide that staff may use following an interaction with a child/ young person who has become dysregulated.

Reflection

After an incident of dysregulation it is helpful for the teacher to reflect on what happened:

- Who can I share my feelings/concern with?
- What was the function of the child/young person's behaviour? What needs were they trying to meet? What was the child/young person trying to communicate?
- How did I respond to the child/young person?
- Where is our relationship at now?
- What assistance do I need?
- Is the child/young person linked in with school support systems?
- Is everyone safe? Do I need to adjust the environment so that all remain safe should this happen again?
- What are your hopes moving forward?

Regulation

- De-briefing with a trusted colleague after an incident facilitates reflection and regulation and opportunity to calm down.
- Understand that what we think affects how we feel and how we behave. This link can be automatic unless we reflect and bring the thoughts and feelings into consciousness resulting in a more measured response.
- Acknowledge how you feel (hurt, angry etc.). Naming the feeling gives it less power. It also creates space between the feeling and your response, time to think and calm down.
- Acknowledge that it is normal to feel like this.
- Acknowledge your own 'buttons', we all have them.
- Request assistance, don't carry it alone.
- Does the child/young person's needs require a response from a school support structure?
- What do you need going forward?
- What does the child/young person need going forward?

Relaxation

- Actively engage in self-care
- Spend time doing things you enjoy
- Spend time with people you enjoy
- Reduce exposure to stress/trauma where possible (news, films, TV etc.)
- Humour
- Be kind to yourself, the child/young person is struggling to acquire the skill of emotional regulation. Behaviour change takes time and setbacks are a



normal part of skill development.

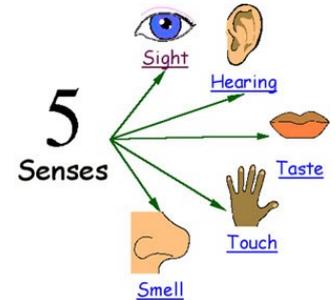
This guide to teacher self-care when managing dysregulation in children and young people is adapted from *Calmer Classrooms*, Downey (2007).



Appendix 3 Mindfulness and Relaxation

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is the process of bringing one's attention to the present moment. Here is a simple mindfulness technique:

- Sit in a relaxed position with your two feet on the ground.
- Take 3 deep breaths relaxing more into the chair.
- Pay attention to pleasant things around you. Firstly, what can you see? Say your answers 'in your head'. Then move onto what you can hear, then taste... touch... and smell.
- Take 3 more deep breaths and enjoy this time of being fully aware of the present moment.



Deep Breathing: Breathing exercises help reduce feelings of physical tension. The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the tummy, getting as much fresh air as possible into your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the tummy, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

Example:

- Sit in a comfortable position with your arms and legs uncrossed.
- Inhale slowly through your nose or mouth (one-thousand one, one thousand, two, one-thousand three) and fill your lungs.
- Silently and gently say to yourself, "I'm filling my body with calm".
- Exhale slowly through your mouth (one-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three), and comfortably empty your lungs.
- Silently and gently say to yourself, "I'm letting the tension drain away".
- Repeat five times slowly.

It may make more sense for younger children to practice deep breathing by blowing up balloons or blowing bubbles into a drink through a straw (i.e. milkshake breathing). In order to do these tasks effectively they have to take in a deep breath to begin. Over time, encourage them to take these breaths without bubbles, balloons or straws. Alternatively, they can try tummy breathing...

Additional breathing exercises are available from the [Professional Development Service for Teachers](#).

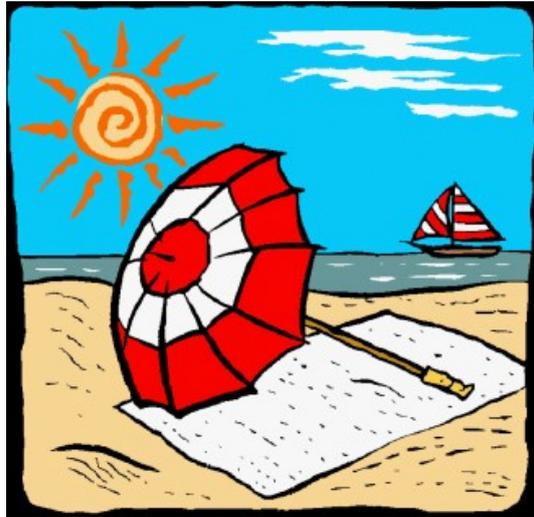
Muscular Relaxation: Tense and relax different muscle groups in your body. For example, tense your toes on your right foot, hold for one, two, three... and relax. Now do the same with your left foot. Move up your body tensing, holding and relaxing different parts as you go. As your body relaxes, so will your mind.

Visualisation – Guided Imagery: Close your eyes and use your imagination to imagine that you are walking down a soft wide path towards the sea. As you walk you feel calm and safe – breathing in and out – calmly and deeply.



Suggested Script:

You can hear the waves rolling onto the beach. You can smell the sea. You can feel a cool breeze on your face. As you walk along the path - breathing in and out – slowly and deeply – you feel sand beneath your feet – it's soft and warm. The sun is shining and the sea is blue and glistening. The sound of the waves rolling onto the beach feels comforting and relaxing. And as you look out at the sea you can match your breathing to the pattern of the waves – slowly in and deeply out– relaxed and happy. You can feel the sun's warmth filling the whole of your body as you gaze towards the water



which is bright and blue and green. The beach is golden, long and wide and there is no-one here but you. This is your beach – your place – your time. Breathing in, filling your body with warmth and relaxation and breathing out – letting go of any stress. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, lower yourself onto the sand. Sitting here quietly you can watch the waves lapping onto the beach – the water is clear and bright and as you watch you continue to feel the warm relaxing feeling flowing over you – and you feel safe and happy and content.

There is no one here but you – this is your beach – this is your place – this is your time. Sitting here in the warm, soft sand, soaking up the sunshine you feel strong and calm and you feel ready to return. Breathing in and out ...slowly and deeply.

Other useful links:

NEPS [Relaxation text](#)

NEPS [Relaxation podcast](#)