

TIP SHEET FOR PARENTS: Emotion Regulation

For children and youth with learning disabilities (LDs), regulating or managing emotions can be particularly difficult.¹ Children and youth with LDs are also two to three times more likely to experience mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression.²

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation is your ability to control your emotional responses to arousing situations.³ Emotion regulation skills may impact how we feel certain emotions; how we pay attention to emotions; how we think about emotions; and how we behave. If we have intact emotion regulation skills we are able to experience a range of emotions, but we are not overwhelmed by those emotions.

Emotion Dysregulation

Emotion dysregulation is when your emotional responses are often out of control.³ They are persistent, severe and significantly impairing (e.g., they get in the way of everyday life and functioning). For a child or youth with a LD, emotion dysregulation may look like anger and aggression getting in the way of making and keeping friendships, or avoidance and withdrawal getting in the way of participating in emotionally challenging activities.



Under-Regulation

Children and youth who have trouble containing intense emotions may seem stuck in the 'on' position and may have trouble exerting control over their emotions and behaviors. Under-regulators may need help from others to manage intense emotions. You may see behaviors including meltdowns, low tolerance for frustration, overreaction, quick temper, mood swings and difficulty calming down.

Over-Regulation

Sometimes children and youth have difficulty managing intense emotions and they keep the emotions tightly held within. You may see behaviors including withdrawal, avoidance, becoming easily upset, or shutting down.

Bucket of Emotions

A different way to think of emotion regulation is as a bucket of emotions. We all have emotional buckets and not every bucket is the same size. You may have a large bucket which has more room for emotions, or you may have a small bucket which has less room for emotions. Stressors throughout the day add different emotions to our buckets. If we have intact emotion regulation skills we may be able to keep our buckets from overflowing. If we

are experiencing emotion dysregulation our buckets may overflow because we are unable to hold everything in.

Emotion Regulation and LDs

We are still learning about the relationship between LDs and emotion regulation. Some children and youth with LDs also have significant difficulties in regulating their emotions. This may reflect the increased experience of stress and anxiety, which results from managing academic, social and environmental demands throughout the day. Some children and youth with LDs may also experience more intense emotions than others.

We know that having a LDs can have an impact on the ability to cope with intense emotions. The challenges vary, depending on the nature of the LD but may include:

- ❖ Information processing difficulties (e.g., challenges in executive functions, memory, attention, language and communication abilities, and the speed at which information is processed)
- ❖ Difficulty understanding what was said or expressing how they are feeling
- ❖ Difficulty understanding how a family member or peer is feeling based on their body language and facial expression, and adjusting their behaviours accordingly
- ❖ Difficulty aligning their tone of voice, body language, facial expressions with how they feel

Helpful Strategies

There are many ways parents and caregivers can support the development of emotion regulation skills, including:

Managing the environment. Consistent limits, clear expectations and predictable routines (e.g., warnings when transitioning) can help children predict how the day will go, which may decrease opportunities for emotions to build up.

Listening for the emotions. Tuning-in and trying to understand what your child is feeling can help your child tolerate and cope with uncomfortable emotions.

Labeling, acknowledging and validating emotions. Labeling the emotion for your child can help to build their emotional vocabulary.

Acknowledging and validating the emotion can support your child in feeling understood. Let your child know their emotions are normal and natural, and everyone experiences different emotions from time to time.

Modeling emotion regulation. Children often learn from their parents and caregivers. Talk about your emotions and coping strategies can help your child learn different emotion regulation skills. In modeling emotion regulation skills it is also important to 'stay calm in the storm' (during emotional outbursts) and use positive self-talk.

Offer help to problem-solve a better way to manage different emotions once you and your child are feeling calm and well regulated. Practice and role-play what to do in stressful situations.

Praise efforts to regulate emotions. Praise your child for attempts or successes related to calming their emotions. Praise helps to bring attention to helpful coping skills.



References

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2. Wilson, A., Armstrong, C., Furrie, A., & Walcot, E. (2009). The mental health of Canadians with self-reported learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 42*(1), 24-40.
3. Webster-Stratton, C. (1995). Emotion regulation. *Parenting Insights*. Retrieved from www.incredibleyears.com/parents-teachers/articles-for-parents/