

Community Paediatric  
Psychology Service



# Helping children to manage big feelings

Information for you



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## What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation is the capacity to manage your emotions and behaviours. It includes the ability to manage highly emotional reactions (like upset, frustration, anger) and to calm yourself down when these big feelings happen.



Self-regulation is something children learn with the help of the adults around them. None of us were born knowing how to control our emotions and the part of the brain that helps with this isn't fully developed until we are in our 20s!

Young children or those with developmental concerns often don't have the words or ability to describe what they want or how they feel. This frustration can make them feel overwhelmed by their emotions. As a result it can take them longer to learn how to regulate.

## What is co-regulation?

In the beginning, babies and young children rely on their parents/ carers to help them regulate. Parents will do this by noticing the signs their child is hungry, tired or upset and responding (hopefully) in a calm and containing way (for example through singing, rocking, cuddling and talking to them). This is called co-regulation. We know that children need co-regulation before they can learn to self-regulate.

Some children can take longer to develop these skills and need a lot more adult support in order to do so.



# The idea of the downstairs and upstairs brain



The ideas and concepts below comes from Dr Dan Siegel and Tina Payne’s book “The whole brain child”.

**Imagine our brains are like a house with an upstairs and a downstairs.**

The downstairs is focused on keeping us safe and making sure our basic needs are met. This part of the house looks out for danger and makes sure we are ready to fight, run or hide when we are faced with a threat.

The upstairs part helps us with:

- thinking
- problem solving
- emotional regulation
- making good choices
- being flexible.

Our brains work best when the upstairs and downstairs work together, with the stairs carrying information between the levels.

The downstairs part of the brain is well developed at birth. The upstairs part takes much longer. The upstairs remains under construction throughout childhood. Because of this, children are often prone to getting “trapped downstairs” which can result in them:

- losing their temper
- making poor decisions
- showing lack of empathy for others
- struggling to understanding the consequences of their behaviour.

During these times, the upstairs and downstairs of the house are no longer connected. The stairway is blocked!

## How do we help to keep both parts of the house connected?

We need to work on the downstairs part of the house to make sure that it is well controlled and the alarm systems are not over sensitive. This will then set the foundations for the ongoing construction of the upstairs of the house.

We do this through helping children to learn regulation skills. One of the most effective ways to regulate the lower parts of the brain is through **patterned repetitive sensory experiences** throughout the day. It is important to remember that rhythm regulates the brain (Bruce Perry).



- Walking
- Listening to music
- Swinging
- Dancing
- Jumping Jacks
- Drumming



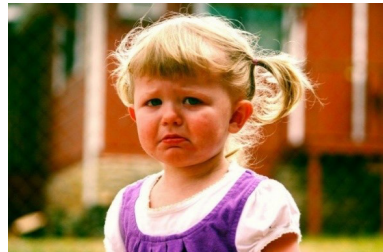
The other way we can do this is through physical touch and nurture. Some children may find physical touch difficult (for example, children who have experienced abuse or medical interventions and have linked touch to pain rather than comfort or those with sensory sensitivities). It is helpful to think about how your child responds to touch. Think of ways to offer calming,

soothing activities that lets them know you are there to care and nurture them. Some examples could be:

- Rubbing lotion on their hands or feet
- Back or head massage
- Painting their nails
- Singing to them
- Using temporary tattoos
- Noticing and counting freckles or other unique parts of them
- Holding and rocking child in a blanket

## Managing tantrums

When you know about the upstairs and downstairs brain it helps you to understand that there are two different kinds of tantrum.



**An upstairs tantrum:** When your child decides to have a tantrum, making a conscious choice to act out and to push buttons until they get what they want. This tantrum could be stopped instantly if you gave into their demand, for example buying the toy or giving them the chocolate bar they want.

This kind of tantrum needs firm boundaries, a consistent response and a chat about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

**A downstairs tantrum:** Requires a different approach. In these situations your child has become so upset that they are no longer able to use their upstairs brain to think, reason or talk about what is going on.

An proper response to a downstairs tantrum is much more comforting and nurturing. A parent will need to connect with their child and help them to calm down (co-regulate). A calm voice, reducing the amount of words you use and physical comfort can be helpful. There is no sense in talking about consequences or appropriate behaviour at these times.

## Managing your own emotions to help your child

Children learn so much from watching their parents/caregivers, including how to manage emotions and deal with challenging situations. Children copy behaviour they see and learn through example. This is why looking at your own behaviour and regulation skills is helpful to think about what your child is learning from you.



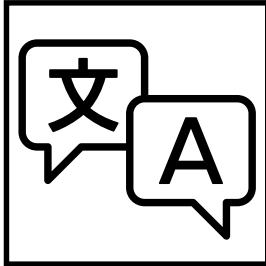
Even as adults we have times when we don't do a great job of managing our emotions. We may react in ways that let us know our downstairs brain has taken over (shouting, swearing, banging doors). After these times, it is important that you label this and talk with your child about your own behaviour (sometimes this might also mean apologising).



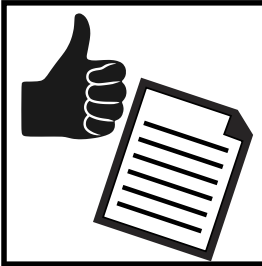
Being able to show positive self-regulation skills and talking about times where you have found it more difficult, will play an important part in helping your child to develop the skills they need.



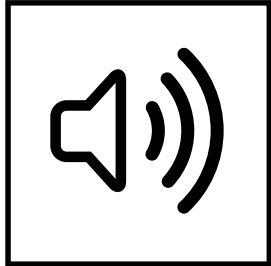
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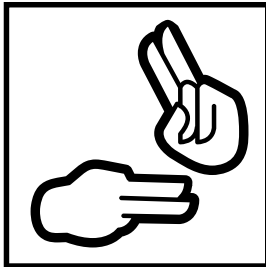
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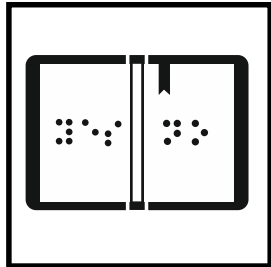
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