

# **Understanding and Managing Your Child's Emotions**

## **Parent Information Session – Post-session Pack**

Coventry and Warwickshire Primary Mental Health Service  
2021/2022

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## What are emotions?

Emotions are something we experience in response to a situation and are usually easy to describe in one word, such as: joy, sad, guilt, upset, surprised and so many more.

It is a common agreement amongst emotion scientists that there are 5 core emotions, and that there are hundreds of variations and intensities of these emotions (Goleman, 1995).

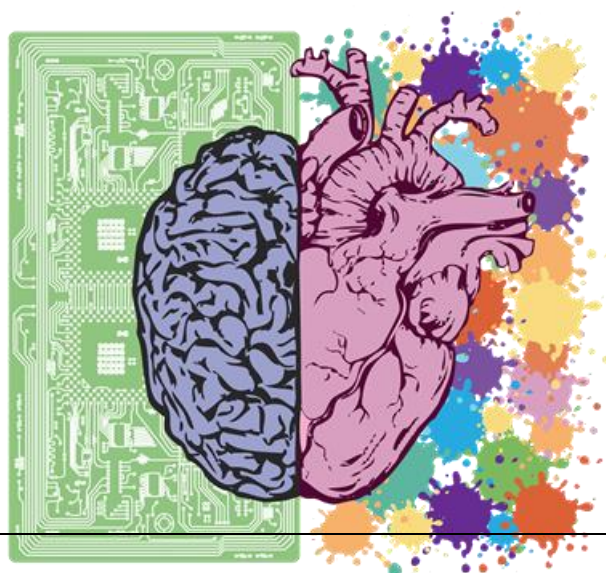
Paul Ekman, who is a leading clinical psychologist in the field of emotion and facial expressions, was the scientific advisor for Disney's *Inside Out* (2015) film. Ekman has published a guide that you can use to encourage conversation with your children about how we feel. You can find the guide at:

<https://www.paulekman.com/projects/inside-out/>



## Why do we have emotions?

The origins of human emotional development are complicated and a topic that remains very much debatable. One common understanding is that we experience emotions because they are paramount to our survival. For example, when our body perceives a situation to be threatening – such as hearing angry shouting – our emotional reaction is to be scared or fearful. In evolutionary terms, this would help our survival as our body kicks into action to manage the perceived threat by, for example, running away.





<https://www.changecounselingllc.com/blog/emotions-arent-good-or-bad>

## Emotions aren't "good" or "bad" ...

In reality there are no objectively 'good' or 'bad' emotions, they are all signals that are trying to give us important messages.

This is important for teaching emotional regulation skills to children because they need to feel that all of their emotions are important and valid to be able to express them appropriately. The problems often come when they're ashamed of their emotions and therefore try to keep them down, leading to emotional build up and, eventually, meltdown. So each time your child feels an emotion, encourage them to ask "what is this feeling trying to tell me?"

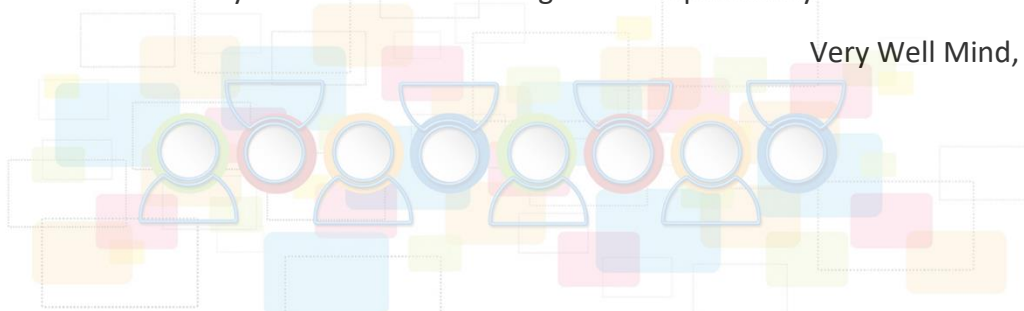
## What is emotional regulation?

Emotion regulation is the ability to recognise, feel and manage an emotion - then being able to bring it down to a level where you are not overwhelmed by it.

Emotion regulation means that we can tolerate emotions that might feel uncomfortable such as fear, anger or sadness, without being flooded by the feeling or having to avoid it completely, because we have developed confidence in our ability to cope with that emotion. We can listen to the important messages that emotion provides, without getting overwhelmed.

Emotional regulation is a lifelong process that happens over time. Infants can't regulate their emotions at all, it is something they learn with the support of their caregivers over time. It is only as individuals move into adulthood and possibly our mid to late 20s that our brains are more fully formed and we can regulate independently.

Very Well Mind, 2020



## Why is emotional regulation helpful?



Emotionally regulated children and young people, that is children and young people who can learn to recognise their emotions and seek help when needed, are most available for learning. Emotional regulation helps us in many areas, including attention and social/emotional:

*Attention – emotional regulation underlies impulse control and our ability to focus and concentrate. If we are distracted by our emotions, this can have consequences academically and socially.*

*Social/emotional – If we can't regulate emotional reactions in our interactions, this can negatively impact on social, emotional and relational skills. Those with better ability to emotionally regulate are more able to participate in social settings; sought out more by other children; and families experience less stress*

Those who struggle with emotional regulation may be more likely to have tantrums or emotional meltdowns or may be excessively rigid (show a preference for things being the same); they may also avoid or become anxious about emotional expression. They may be more likely to feel disconnected from others

Martin & Ochsner (2016)

## Emotional development and challenges through the school years



### Preschool (2-5)

| Emotional expression   | Emotional regulation   | Emotions in relationships  |
|--|--|--|
| Starting to use more words for emotions alongside non-verbal expressions (e.g. tantrums) | Primarily uses communication with others to understand and manage emotions | Starting to increase insight into the emotions of others and that they can be different from one's own |
| Pretending to express range of emotions in play  | Starts to use 'self-talk' to make sense of and manage some emotions        | Beginning to realise that false expression of emotion can mislead others                               |
| Begins to express emotions involving self-consciousness e.g. shame / pride               |  |  |

## Preschool (2-5) Challenges

- Leaving home with its familiar people and ways of behaving
- Learning to manage with less adult help– being more independent
- Meeting new & different people, both children and adults
- Learning lots of new skills and performing new tasks
- Beginning to compete and compare themselves with others – development of early self-esteem

It is normal for children's behaviour to seem to progress then regress again at this time e.g. while they're struggling to manage at the new school - children may become more 'babyish' or demanding at home.

At this age children need to spend a lot of time learning to manage situations through play



## Early School (5-7)

| Emotional expression                              | Emotional regulation  | Emotions in relationships  |
|---|---|--|
| Starts to present 'cool' emotional front to peers | Increasing independence with understanding and managing day to day emotions | Starting to increase insight into the emotions of others and that they can be different from one's own |
|   | Beginning to regulate self-conscious emotions (e.g. embarrassment)          | Increased use of social skills to deal with emotions of self and others                                |
|   | Still prefers to involve caregivers in emotional regulation                 | Understanding of emotional scripts and their role in them  |

## Early School (5-7) Challenges

- Moving away from adults leading to developing a sense of being able to plan and achieve goals for themselves
- Developing cooperative play skills with peers
- Coping with competitive rivalry which impacts fast changing peer hierarchies, including joking, teasing and aggression from others.
- Still often caught up in the feeling of the moment and struggling to understand emotions towards one person can be varied and complex e.g. Shouts "I hate you!"

Play is still a really important element to support children this age with developing emotional literacy and understanding



### Middle School (7-10)

| Emotional expression  | Emotional regulation   | Emotions in relationships  |
|---|--|--|
| Starting to increase use of emotional expressions to manage closeness / distance in relationships | Starts to prefer to regulate emotions independently more often (rather than involving adults)                        | Awareness of feeling multiple emotions about the same person or situation (e.g. can be angry with someone they like) |
|   | Beginning to use distancing strategies to manage emotions if child perceives they have little control over situation | Use more complex info about emotions of self and others in pursuit of making and maintaining friendships             |

### Middle School (7-10) Challenges

- Making sense of own strengths and weaknesses –and differences with peers
- Self-esteem beginning to become a focus again
- Beginning to withdraw from family life to focus on friendships and feeling included
- Children who struggle with friendships may begin to be affected by this – in particular aggressive behaviour and developing poor social skills
- Puberty and hormones
- First feelings of sexual attraction, first boyfriends/girlfriends

At this age children still need to test out learning to manage situations through play – this may now involve more complex make believe and media (e.g. books, films etc.)

### Preadolescence (10-13)

| Emotional expression  | Emotional regulation   | Emotions in relationships   |
|---|--|---|
| Distinction made between genuine emotional expression with close friends, and managed display of self with others – beginnings of “impression management” | Beginning to identify and use multiple strategies for independently managing emotions (including stress) | Increased understanding of social roles, and emotional scripts, in making and maintaining friendships – beginning to understand the role of mutual emotional self-disclosure in close friendships |

## Preadolescence (10-13) Challenges

- Puberty & hormones continued
- Transition to secondary school – increased demands and independence
- Peer pressure
- Being accepted into a social group and coping with changes within the group
- Withdrawing from family life to form their own identity and values
- Starting to experiment with showing who they are to the world "Who am I?"

At this age children still need family time and adult support but may be less likely to communicate this clearly

## Emotional reactions are QUICK

Part of the problem with being able to regulate our emotions is that emotional reactions are quick, and quicker than our thoughts.



Our brain is wired to look for threats or rewards. If one is detected, the feeling part of the brain quickly responds with the release of chemical messages, which travel through the body – these are our emotions.

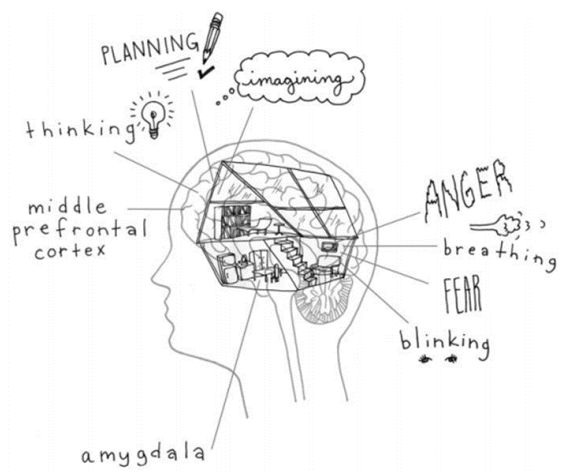
Detection of threats release adrenaline and cortisol, which prepare us for fight or flight. Detection of rewards release dopamine, oxytocin or serotonin, which feel good and motivate us. Release of these chemicals is quick and automatic and this is important to keep us safe and protected. If we were in front of a bear waiting for our thoughts to kick in and decide what to do for example, this probably wouldn't end well. Our emotions help us to respond quickly to keep us safe. Whilst this is great in certain situations, it can cause problems in others.

Because the feeling bit kicks in first before the thinking bit, particularly if the feeling is very strong or overwhelming, it can prevent us from thinking rationally in the moment when there isn't a real threat. So we respond with fight, flight or freeze and our lid is flipped before we even know what's happening. Our emotions basically hijack our brain and stop us thinking rationally.

For further information, you can view the Sentis Brain Animation Series – Emotions and the Brain: <https://sentis.com.au/articles/brain-animation-series>



## Upstairs and downstairs brain

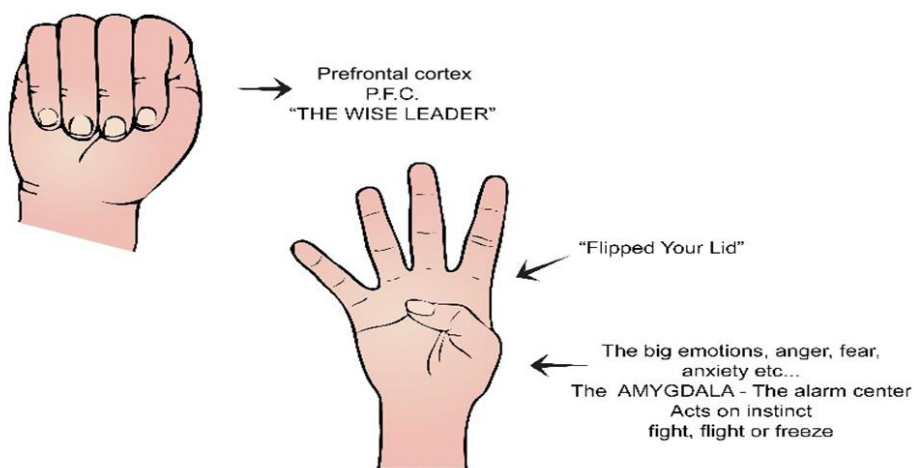


Downstairs brain: alert for danger/threat, primitive, emotion led

Upstairs brain: thinking, problem solving, creativity, flexibility, empathy, planning

Seigel & Bryson, 2011

## “Flipping One’s Lid”



Credit: Daniel Siegel, V.D., is the creator of this metaphor and expression "Flipped Lid". Copyright © 2014 www.sharon-selby.com

Sharon Selby © 2015 [www.SharonSelby.com](http://www.SharonSelby.com)



So learning how to understand and regulate our emotions is part of a learning process that takes time, as our brains develop. It involves different parts of our brain, that slowly learn to communicate with each other through modelling, practice and repetition.

The hand model is a way of understanding how our brains work and develop.

Take your thumb and put it over the middle of your hand and put your fingers over the top – this is a representation of the brain.

So here we have the spinal cord, going up into the brainstem and limbic system, which work together to regulate arousal and your emotions, as well as the fight, flight, freeze response. You then have a higher part of the brain, the cortex, which sits over the top and allows us to perceive the outside world, think and reason. This front part of the hand/brain is the bit that regulates all the bits going on downstairs in the emotional part.

In an ideal world, these two parts sit closely together and communicate well, so that we can have emotional experiences but also regulate them so they do not feel overwhelming. This process of communication takes time however and the two parts of the brain aren't really fully connected and communicating consistently until people reach their late 20s.

So what happens when these two parts aren't communicating so well?

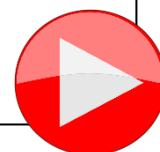
Sometimes this downstairs part of the brain gets fired up and start rumbling – it responds in fight, flight, freeze mode in situations which might be threatening. Maybe we're tired, stressed, we heard a dog bark loudly, someone shouted, or someone has simply pushed our buttons all day. All kinds of things can happen, which means that our emotional brain starts rumbling and we can 'flip our lids'. This process creates a gap in communication between the emotional and rational parts of our brain and stops us acting rationally or flexibly. We lose communication with the upstairs part, which would normally stop us acting impulsively and help us to calm down.

As we get older, these two parts naturally communicate much better with each other but as children, these two parts don't always communicate well as we they haven't yet formed many pathways or connections between the the two bits. It is through the process of emotional regulation described before and with the help of our parents, that these two parts start to communicate better.

Of course there will always be times when the downstairs brain gets really agitated and start rumbling. But if the old and new have strong pathways, they might be able to talk better, helping us to stay calm and manage the situation we're in.

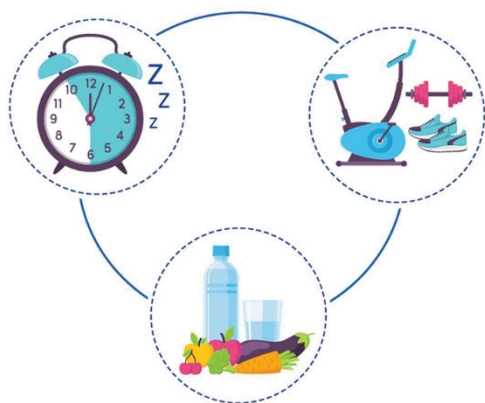
Also, because this rational part of the brain doesn't develop fully until the mid to late 20s, it's important that parents continue to co-regulate and 'lend' their upstairs brain, to help the child develop these skills.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc&index=46&list=PLvoWj2Qxk70F5rjyxsg3y3ZoC1NtK6fvc> – you can show this video to your child for a good summary of this explanation.



## Practical Strategies to Support

### Before



Start with the basics.

A good sleep routine, a good balanced diet and movement/exercise is the first step for general overall wellbeing

Gillespie, 2020

### Family life



Predictability & routine  
House rules  
Fairness

### Emotions



Talk about emotions  
Positive attention & play  
Role modelling

Webster-Stratton, 2001)

## Family life:

**Predictability** is important so that children know what to expect and when to expect it (this can't be for every eventuality but a consistent degree of predictability – it might be that there are bedtimes for term time and bedtimes for school holiday times etc.)

**House rules** can help to manage expectations – so that the child knows what is within and outside the boundaries in terms of behaviour.

**Fairness** can be explained as 'people are treated the way they need to be treated'. You wouldn't treat a 2 year old the same as a 10 year old in terms of discipline as their developmental stages will require different strategies.

## Emotions:

**Positive attention & play** – use your relationship to help your child to do things that matter to them. Encourage and take part in activities/play that your children value to increase positive feelings, because increased positive feelings enable children to regulate more easily and builds a positive sense of self.

**Talk about emotions** – make it the norm to have conversations about feelings. Use characters from stories to open up a conversation about emotions and help your child to develop empathy (upstairs brain) – e.g. how do you think they might be feeling?

Being a **good role model** – If you want children to stop shouting, you probably need to stop shouting... Sometimes talking out loud can be helpful for them to learn how you're managing your emotions e.g. "I am starting to feel really cross about this, my heart is beating quickly and I can feel my mouth getting dry so I am going to go to the other room and count to 10/take some deep breaths/step outside in the fresh air and wait for my feelings to calm down a bit" – when children hear their caregivers use such sentences, they will learn to use the same language.

## During

**Hear the emotion:** identify and label the emotions behind the behaviour. 'If I were my child in this situation, how would I be feeling?' Their worries might not make sense to you but you can try to see them from their perspective. Be curious about what might be going on for them internally and tentatively label their experiences. E.g. I wonder if you're feeling... / It looks like you might feel... / You seem really ...

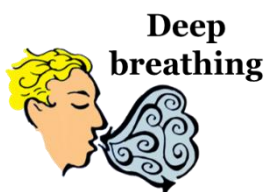


**Be with:** being alongside your child in times of dysregulation communicates that you are able to tolerate their emotions and help them manage them – this is likely to help them feel less overwhelmed and safe knowing that someone is available to support them. Accepting their emotions (not the same as accepting their behaviour) is essential. E.g. It's okay to feel ... (it's not okay to hit me).

"You seem really mad that I said no."

**Calming strategies include:**

Please see: <https://parentswithconfidence.com/calm-down-strategies-for-kids/>



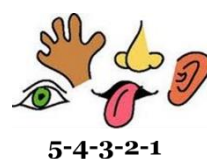
**Deep breathing:** Put your hands on your stomach and pay attention to your belly going up and down as you breathe. Count to 5 while breathing in, then count to 5 when breathing out. Repeat.

**Hand push:** Bring palms together in front of your chest and push as hard as possible. Hold until tired.



**Tree:** Standing with your feet hip distance apart, root your feet into the ground imagining roots growing deep into the earth, while stretching your hands high above your head whilst imagining them as branches reaching for the sky.

**5-4-3-2-1:** Name 5 things in the room that you can see, then 5 things you can hear, then 5 sensations [then 4-3-2-1]



5-4-3-2-1



**Movement:** Running, jumping, push ups, skipping etc.

**Soothing sensation:** e.g. hugging a stuffed animal, wrapping them in a cosy blanket, pretend to draw pictures on their back.



**Soothing sensations**

After

### Redirect & Reflect (Seigel & Bryson, 2011)

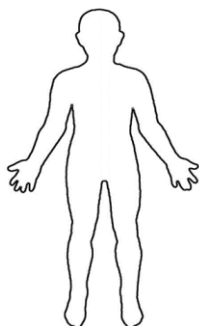
Once the big emotions of the downstairs brain have settled, you can redirect your child using upstairs brain strategies of problem solving and exploring more appropriate behaviour. "What could you do differently in this situation the next time?" Offer discipline and boundary setting when appropriate.

Reflect on what happened using ABC – Antecedent (trigger – what happened before?), behaviour, consequence (what happened after?). If there is a clearer idea of possible triggers, then similar situations may be preventable in the future.

It is generally a good idea to discuss misbehaviour and its consequences once the child has settled and calmed down. Moments of emotional flooding are not the best times for lessons to be learned. Consider yourself a lifeguard who swims out to, puts your arms around your child, and helps him to shore before telling the child not to swim out so far next time.

What could you do differently in this situation next time?

What got in the way of doing the most helpful thing?



Recognising how emotions feel in the body: In order to be able to regulate emotions we also need to learn how to recognise emotions. You can model this for your child.

Help your child to identify how strong emotions (happiness/anxiety/sadness/anger) feel in their body and plot them on a blank figure so they can begin to recognise the physical signs with the change in emotional state...





Parenting is hard – don't forget to think about support for you.

Who do you have that you can talk to?  
Can you access support through a local organisation?



## Websites for further information and support

For further information and support around mental health, visit:



**NHS:** <https://www.covwarkpt.nhs.uk/>

**Rise:** <https://cwrise.com/for-young-people>

**Mind:** <https://www.mind.org.uk/>



**YoungMinds:** <https://youngminds.org.uk/>

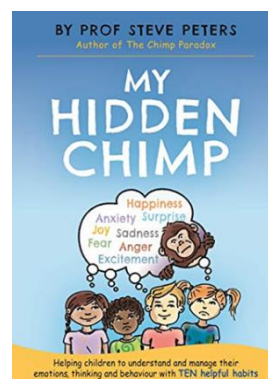
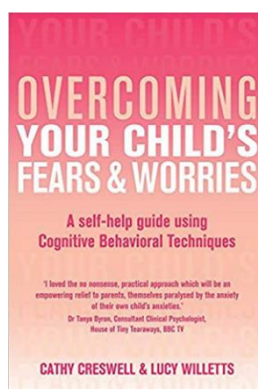
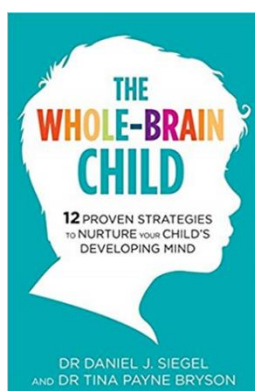
**Time to change:** <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

**Mental Health Foundation:** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>

**MindEd:** <https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/>



### Useful Books:



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