Emotional Regulation

"Calm Down" Breathing

Just like adults, children can experience overwhelming emotions such as stress, frustration, and anxiety. However, young children have limited skills and experience in managing these big feelings. Emotional regulation—the ability to recognise, process, and respond to emotions in a healthy way—is a critical skill that begins to develop in early childhood. When children learn to regulate their emotions, they gain the ability to navigate daily frustrations, build resilience, and develop a sense of emotional security that serves them throughout life.

As children grow and gain independence, they begin to realise that life does not always go their way. Their emotional responses to situations are natural and valid, but without proper guidance, these emotions can dictate their actions and words, rather than becoming an internal tool to help them process and respond effectively.

Children learn to regulate their emotions by practicing emotional regulation in safe and supportive environments. A key part of this process is how caregivers model emotional regulation. Young children are keen observers who learn through imitation, meaning that your approach to managing your own emotions directly influences how your child learns to handle theirs. Helping your child to effectively regulate their emotions begins with how you regulate yours.

One of the most effective techniques for managing emotions—both in children and adults—is mindful breathing. When emotions run high, the nervous system shifts into a heightened state, activating the body's stress response. Breathing exercises can help counteract this response by increasing oxygen flow, slowing the heart rate, and signalling the brain to calm down. This is the state in which we can solve problems and communicate our needs more clearly and effectively.

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Introducing breathing techniques to your child can give them a tangible way to regain control over their emotions and shift from a reactive state to a regulated one. When your child is experiencing overwhelming emotions, try out these breathing techniques with them:

In and Out Breathing

- Get down to your child's eye level and gently take their hands if they are comfortable.
- Say, "Let's breathe in and out together."
- Model slow, deep breaths, exaggerating the movement and sound of inhaling and exhaling.
- Continue for as long as your child is engaged. If they become upset or distracted, acknowledge their feelings and reassure them that you will help, but for now, you'll take a few more breaths together.

Let's Take 5

Once your child is familiar with basic mindful breathing, introduce "Let's take 5."

- In moments of emotional overwhelm, calmly and gently cue them to 'Let's Take 5': five deep breaths in, five big breaths out. You can do this with your child, counting each breath on your fingers, and then when they are more independent, you can prompt them to do this on their own when needed.
- Complete the process with a high five when the five breaths are complete to initiate a problem-solving discussion about the situation that caused them to feel overwhelmed.

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Shake It Out

Since emotional dysregulation also affects the body, combining breathwork with movement can be highly effective.

- Encourage your child to take a deep breath in and then shake their whole body while exhaling.
- This technique helps to release built-up body tension and reset the nervous system.
- Practice together at first, then gradually transition to verbal cues like, "Let's shake it out." Or "Do you/would you like to shake it out?"

Make It Move

- Giving children a visual focus for their breathing can make the practice more engaging.
- Use objects like a feather, pinwheel, or piece of paper and encourage them to "make it move" with their breath.
- Practicing this technique in a calm moment can help them remember to use it when emotions escalate.

Breathe

Remember to model and narrate your own regulation. When you use breathing techniques, narrate what you're doing: "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to do some in-and-out breathing to calm down." This reinforces the value of breathwork and makes it a natural part of daily life. Children learn best through repetition and consistency. The calmer and more grounded you remain, the safer they will feel when practicing these techniques.

Emotional regulation is a skill that takes time and practice to develop. By introducing mindful breathing techniques and providing a supportive environment, caregivers can equip children with the tools they need to manage their emotions effectively now and in the future.

About the Author

Kirsten is an early childhood expert with over 20 years of experience in education, including teaching, leadership roles and policy development. Holding a Master's Degree in Early Childhood and a Bachelor of Education (Primary), she specialises in assisting parents and their children navigate the early years of life, school readiness and the transition to school. Kirsten has contributed to early education policy papers, school readiness programs, teaching standards, and curriculum development and served on advisory boards and committees for the NSW Institute of Teachers, the Catholic Education Office, and the NSW Independent Schools Association. Through her consultancy, she empowers parents and educators with expert guidance on best practices in early childhood development, ensuring strong foundations for lifelong learning.