

Practitioner's Guide to Emotion Regulation in School-Aged Children

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by

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 Springer

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ISBN-13: 978-0-387-73850-5

e-ISBN-13: 978-0-387-73851-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007938962

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This text is designed for school psychologists and other mental health workers in schools to strengthen their capacity to help children and adolescents who must learn to regulate their emotions or strengthen their ability to do so. After thirty years in education working with children and adolescents, emotion regulation appears to me to be a key variable in student functioning that we have not fully understood or successfully addressed. The text is dedicated to the children who must frequently deal with intense emotion that they have difficulty controlling. Not only are these children and adolescents the most challenging and tiring for parents and school staff, they are also the most interesting and the most fun when their emotions are positive.

Contents

Figures	xiii
Introduction	xvii
1. The Importance of Emotion Regulation in Child and Adolescent Functioning and School Success	1
Emotion Regulation	1
Definitions of Emotion Regulation	2
Emotion Regulation and Related Concepts	3
Emotion Regulation versus Emotional Regulation	3
Affect Regulation	4
Mood	4
Coping and Stress Reduction	4
Self-Control	5
Effortful Control	5
Domains of Emotion Regulation	6
Importance of Emotion Regulation	8
Current Research on Emotion Regulation	8
Relevance for School Psychologists and Other Practitioners	9
2. Emotional Dysregulation: Emotion Regulation Gone Wrong	13
Underdeveloped Emotion Regulation	13
Physiological Symptoms and Disorders	14
Role of Emotional Dysregulation in Many Childhood Disorders	15
Borderline Personality Disorder	16
Autism Spectrum Disorders	17
Bipolar Disorder	17
Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	17
Aggressive Students	18
Internalizing Disorders	18
Generalized Anxiety Disorder	19
Depressive Disorders	19

Negative Emotionality, Effortful Control, and Attention	20
Implications for Helping Students in Schools	23
3. Understanding the Biology of Emotion and Using this Knowledge to Develop Interventions	25
Brain-Body Connections	25
Affective Style	25
Developmental Changes in the Brain	26
Brain Structures	27
The Amygdala	27
The Prefrontal Cortex	29
The Hippocampus	30
Response to Stress	31
Emotion Regulation, Stress, and Impulse Control	32
Implications	33
4. Development of Emotion Regulation in Young Children	39
Influences on Emotion Development	39
The Influence of Temperament	39
Emotion Regulatory Aspects of Temperament	41
Development during the Infant and Toddler Period	43
Emergence of Language	44
Preschool Period	44
Implications	47
5. Parenting and Emotion Regulation	49
The Effect of Parenting on Children’s Emotional Development	49
Parenting Styles	50
Positive Parenting	51
Family Expressiveness	53
Parent ‘Talk’ about Emotions	53
Parents’ Reactions to Negative Emotions	55
Emotion Coaching	56
Parental Approach and Avoidance	58
Parent Training	59
Repair Strategies	60
Cognitive-Behavioral Training	60
6. Emotion Regulation in the Classroom	63
Social-Emotional Adjustment and Academic Success	63
Academics and Emotions	63
Self-Regulation of Attention	64
Academic Emotions	65
Test Anxiety	66
Student-Teacher Relationships	68

- Classroom Climate 71
- Social-Emotional Development and Schooling 72
- Emotion Regulation Can Be Strengthened 75
- Programs that Address Emotion Regulation to Varying
 - Degrees 77
 - Second Step 77
 - PATHS 78
 - Dinosaur School 79
 - SCERTS 79
 - Strong Kids/Strong Teens 80
 - beyondblue 80
 - Making Choices: Social Problem Solving for Children 80
 - A New Project 81
- Promising Resources 81

- 7. Emotion Regulation and Social Functioning in the Context of the Peer Group 83**
 - Social Functioning 83
 - The Influence of the Peer Group 84
 - Display Rules 86
 - Empathy 88
 - Effects of Rejection on Emotion Regulation 89
 - Bullying 92
 - Victims of Bullying 93
 - Interventions 95
 - Universal Programs to Improve Empathy 95
 - Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) 96
 - Programs that Include Empathy Training Components 96
 - An Unusual Program 97
 - Antibullying Programs 97
 - Curricula for Small Groups 98
 - Interventions Involving Teachers 98

- 8. Regulating Positive and Negative Emotions: Adaptive and Non-Adaptive Reactions to Stress 99**
 - Coping with Stress 99
 - Coping Styles 101
 - Specific Emotion Regulation Strategies 103
 - Antecedent- and Response-Focused Emotion Regulation 104
 - Less Healthy Down Regulation Strategies 105
 - Suppression 105
 - Rumination 106
 - Avoidance 107
 - Negative Self-Thinking 108

Healthier Down-Regulating Strategies 108

 Engaging in Pleasant Activities 108

 Positive Reappraisal 109

 Mindfulness 109

Approaches to Improve Self-Regulation 109

 Dialectical Behavior Therapy 111

 Recent Approaches to Help Children and Adolescents 112

 Treatments for Internalizing Problems 113

 Interventions for Depression 114

 Interventions for Anxiety 115

 Treatments for Angry Externalizing Behaviors 116

 Anger Management 120

**9. Strategies for Parents and Teachers: Strengthening Skills
for Parents and Teachers to Help Students Regulate**

Emotions 123

 Engaging Adults to Help Children 123

 Reacting to Negative Emotions in Children 124

 Matching Children’s Temperaments 126

 Discussions about Emotion 127

 Emotion Coaching 130

 School Stress 133

 Classroom Climate 134

 Strategies for Teaching Emotion Regulation 134

 Diverse Populations 139

 Gender Variables 141

 Identified Children 142

10. Adapting Interventions for Use with School-Aged Children 143

 Need for Adaptations 143

 Adapting Intervention Tools for Practice 143

 Cognitive Behavioral Therapy 143

 Adaptations of Cognitive Tools 145

 Mantras 152

 Self-Talk 153

 Acceptance 153

 Social Problem Solving 154

 Exposure and Fear Hierarchies 154

 Power Card Strategy 159

 Meditation 159

 “As If” Technique 160

 Accommodations for English Language Learners 160

 Tools for Teaching Strategies 160

 Quick Tools 163

- 11. The Intervention Process: Strengthening Interventions in the School**
- Setting** 169
- Planning Interventions to Improve Students' Emotion Regulation. . . 169
- Identifying Students Who Have to Improve Their Emotion Regulation 170
- Tools for School Psychologists 170
- Planning Interventions 172
- Matching Interventions to Students' Needs and Abilities 176
- Triggers 177
- Goal Setting 177
- Planning for Generalization 178
- Self-Recording and Self-Monitoring 181
- Summary 184

- References** 185

- Postscript** 219

- Subject Index** 221

Figures

Informational figures are provided to help elucidate concepts, provide additional information and research of interest, or to provide an example of how concepts could be thought about or used. The Tools/Worksheets/Handouts are practical materials that can be used by practitioners in their day-to-day work with students, teachers and/or parents.

Informational

- Figure 2.1. Emotion Regulation Weaknesses Associated with Internalizing and Externalizing Disorders
- Figure 3.1. Areas of the Brain Involved in Emotional Learning
- Figure 3.2. Relaxation Training
- Figure 4.1. Emotional Regulatory Skills Mastered by the End of the Preschool Period.
- Figure 4.2. Coping Strategies of Preschoolers
- Figure 5.1. Parenting Styles
- Figure 5.2. Elements of Positive Parenting that Influence Emotional Regulation in Children
- Figure 6.1. Test Anxiety
- Figure 6.3. Student-Teacher Relationships
- Figure 6.4. Implementing SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) Curricula Additionally Affect Academic performance
- Figure 6.5. Studies Supporting the Relationship between Social-Emotional Learning and Academic Success
- Figure 6.6. Resources for Program Evaluations
- Figure 7.1. The Cool Rule
- Figure 7.2. Examples of Peer Group Norms
- Figure 7.3. Victims of Bullying
- Figure 8.1. Coping Strategies
- Figure 8.2. Strengthening or Reteaching Coping Strategies
- Figure 8.3. Effects of Cognitive Behavior Therapy

- Figure 9.1. The Intense Anger of Temper Tantrum
- Figure 9.2. Parenting Anxious Children
- Figure 9.4. Talking with Children about Negative Emotions
- Figure 9.7a. People Watching
- Figure 10.9. Use of Mantras
- Figure 10.11. Problem-Solving Steps
- Figure 10.12. Fear Hierarchies: Sample for a First-Grade Student
- Figure 11.1. Identifying Specific Social-Emotional Skills Weaknesses
- Figure 11.2. Tools Used in Research or Under Development
- Figure 11.7. Self-Recording

Tools/Worksheets/Handouts

- Figure 3.3. Emotional Pathways in the Brain for Children
- Figure 3.4. Emotional Pathways in the Brains for Parents and Teachers
- Figure 5.3. Matching the Adult Response to the Child's Level of Distress
- Figure 5.4. Repair Strategies
- Figure 6.2. Interventions for Test Anxiety
- Figure 8.4. Students' Anger Intensity and Use of Display Rules
- Figure 9.3. Facilitating Regulation. Making Regulating Commentary versus Avoidance-Inducing Commentary
- Figure 9.5. Dialoguing with Children
- Figure 9.6. Use of Coping and Regulating Strategies Worksheet
- Figure 9.7b. People Watching Technique
- Figure 9.8. Identifying Anger Triggers Worksheet
- Figure 9.9. Fifteen Recommendations for Teaching Anxious Children(Handout)
- Figure 9.10. Shifting Negative Moods
- Figure 9.11. Coaching Techniques for Teachers (Handout)
- Figure 10.1. Intensity
- Figure 10.2. Putting Your Feelings in Perspective
- Figure 10.3. Constructing the Number Scale
- Figure 10.4. Sample Scale for Anxiety Reduction
- Figure 10.5. Design and Use of a Number Scale
- Figure 10.6. Response Card
- Figure 10.7. Anger Reduction Tool for Elementary Students
- Figure 10.8. Sample Anger Reduction Tool for Older Students
- Figure 10.10. Thought Bubbles
- Figure 10.13. Various Analogue Scales for Students of Different Ages and Abilities
- Figure 10.14. Power Cards

- Figure 10.15. Controlling the Angry Beast
- Figure 10.16. A Sample Social Story
- Figure 10.17. Quick Relaxation Exercises
- Figure 10.18. Choosing the Top ‘Three’ Quick Strategies
- Figure 10.19. White Bears
- Figure 10.20. Worry Stones Script
- Figure 11.3. Helping Children Generate Internal and External Anger Regulation
- Figure 11.4. Common Triggers and Strategies for Identifying Triggers
- Figure 11.5. Identify Negative Thoughts and Generate Counter Thoughts (Sample)
- Figure 11.6. Self-Monitoring Tool

Introduction

After thirty years in education, a practitioner begins to step back and reflect upon the “big picture.” What do we as mental health practitioners do well? What are the areas in which we have to develop more skills, strategies, and techniques in order to help students function more successfully? Why are some of our most frequent interventions not working? How can we do better? These questions are inevitable, and they are not easily answered.

One practice that is not working well is the training in social skills. School psychologists and other practitioners spend a lot of time attempting to train for social skills when there are considerable data to indicate that these efforts are often not successful. A major flaw in training for social skills is poor generalization. The skills that we teach, and that students appear to learn at least in the contexts in which we teach them, are not being exhibited in the environments in which students need them. In the fast-moving, confusing, often noisy, and complex peer world, all of our efforts to train social skills are invisible. The peer world is, of course, where young people need these skills the most, for fitting into that world is vitally important for their general emotional adjustment as well as for academic success!

When students are observed, the skills that were trained are not being used. One of the primary problems is the fact that many children who need social skills training cannot control their emotions well enough to think about using their skills, if in fact they can focus on them well enough to think about using them or even can recall them at all.

Emotion regulation is a critical missing piece in our training. Moreover, we must considerably change the way we deliver skills and strategies. Many of the ones that we teach are not developmentally appropriate, are not intensive enough, are not delivered often enough, or are not delivered in relevant contexts.

There are considerable data available to help us improve our training and the targeted and specific interventions that we want to deliver to help schoolchildren. Some of these data are ignored and some are not well known, but the information is available if we look for it. Regulating emotion is a fairly new focus of researchers, and we do not yet know enough about how to help children who are having difficulties. This book is designed to support the work of school

psychologists and other mental health workers in schools in regard to understanding, facilitating, and strengthening students' emotion regulation.

Chapter 1 offers a basic introduction to the "hot topic" of emotion regulation. A broad view of the subject is helpful, although there does not yet seem to be a clear, agreed upon definition of emotion regulation among researchers. Several concepts related to emotion regulation are discussed along with the domains and components of emotion regulation. 'Good enough' ability to regulate one's emotions means physical and mental health for students, and in our culture learning to regulate emotion appropriately is critical for academic success, personal satisfaction, and a sense of competence and resilience. Current research dealing with the relevance of emotion regulation for students will help school psychologists and other mental health practitioners appreciate why they have to understand the science of emotion regulation as well as the clinical work needed to help students from preschool through high school.

The discomfort and pain that underdeveloped emotion regulation causes children and adolescents are covered in Chapter 2. Although dysregulation at a particular stage of development can be temporary with no long-term effects, repeated patterns of emotion regulation that strongly interfere with competence can place a student at risk for developing a disorder or can be the symptoms of a disorder. The chapter discusses the role of emotion dysregulation in physiological disorders and in the major disorders of childhood: borderline personality disorder, autism spectrum disorders, bipolar disorder, attention-deficit disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and the depressive disorders. Considerations for interventions are introduced. The control of negative emotions is the key to helping children who have identified disorders or are at risk for developing disorders. It is also important to strengthen effortful control and attention.

A brief understanding of the connection between the brain and the body with the goal of making emotion less mysterious and possibly more controllable is delineated in Chapter 3. Children's emotional behavior may represent an "affective style" of responding. We have to appreciate that there are individual differences in the ways in which emotions are experienced, how often they are experienced, and to what degree.

The brain structures that are involved in emotional learning include the amygdala, the prefrontal cortex, and the hippocampus. The "stress response" is a brain-based reaction that triggers behavior. When a child who is already exhibiting poor emotion regulation is placed under stress, it will be especially difficult for him or her to regulate emotion and recover. The appeal of feeling better in the present may overcome the appeal of any longer-term goals. An improved understanding of the biology of emotion can help us in our search for interventions that will be helpful in several ways.

It is important to understand typical development, so that underdeveloped emotion regulation can be identified early and addressed. In Chapter 4, we see that the emotion regulatory aspects of temperament are helpful in appreciating an individual's response to his or her several primary environments. Children with different temperaments can be distinguished by the ways in which they

regulate their emotions. Researchers trying to determine the relationship between a child's temperament and his or her growing ability to regulate emotions have explored how behaviors that reflect temperament influence styles of emotional control. The connection between emotion regulation, attention regulation, and temperament also affects a child's developing social competence. Development of emotion regulation during infancy and toddlerhood and the role of language are discussed as well as emotion regulation during the preschool period. Emotion regulation is a key developmental task of the early childhood period, yet significant numbers of children continue to have difficulty as they begin formal schooling.

The influence of parenting styles and practices on the development of emotion regulation and the various ways that children learn about emotions are described in Chapter 5. "Positive parenting" is a term that is used to describe parent-child interactions that are important for the study of the development of emotion regulation. Family expressiveness of positive emotion has been connected to emotion regulation as has family 'talk' about emotions.

Parents' reactions to children's negative emotions are particularly influential in regard to the development of emotion regulation. Children who are punished when they exhibit negative feelings associate their emotion with negative consequences, which increases their distress and the intensity of the emotion, and it is difficult for these children to regulate their emotions. Children whose parents who use an interactive style around expression of emotion that is similar to "coaching" can generally regulate their emotions and tend not to behave aggressively. Both parenting and child behavior can also be explored in terms of approach and avoidance motivation. Finally, a number of interventions have been developed to help parents increase positive behaviors when interacting with their children, and these are discussed as well.

Emotion in the classroom has recently been recognized as an area of interest by researchers. Chapter 6 examines a student's ability to regulate emotion and function in class. Anxiety is the most frequently experienced (and studied) academic emotion in the school setting. There is a body of research to indicate that anxiety decreases children's test performance as do their beliefs about their competency in various school subjects.

There is convincing evidence to indicate that early relationships with teachers as well as parents are important in determining whether or not a child will learn self-regulation skills and emotion regulation, take others' perspectives, and develop relationships. Classroom climate is also important. When it is ambiguous or negative, avoidance behaviors, disruption, and cheating are more likely. Evidence is provided that indicates that emotion regulation in children and adolescents can be improved. Programming is explored and its importance becomes clear when we realize that emotional and social skills are closely connected to academic performance.

Students may feel that their most important issues have to do with friendships and other peer relationships. Chapter 7 deals with peer relationships. Young people who are strong in effortful control of their emotions are socially

competent and are liked by their peers. Emotion dysregulation places children at risk for isolation from or rejection by their peers. The peer group is a key source of emotional knowledge and practice. Boys and girls learn how and when to express emotion through social interactions with their peers, and display rules are learned within the context of the peer group. Children create their own rules about how emotions can or cannot be expressed. Prosocial behavior is significantly reduced even when young people simply think that they may be excluded from the group. In order to avoid rejection, they must learn to keep anger under control and express it carefully. Emotion regulation is especially important when considering victims of bullying.

Students with varying abilities in emotion regulation and varying degrees of reactivity may respond differently to different types of interventions. The varieties of interventions available for consideration by school psychologists to deal with peer issues include curricula that feature empathy training and antibullying techniques, and these are reviewed.

School is stressful for many students. Chapter 8 deals with how students adapt to stress and how they can be helped to develop more effective strategies. Young people develop coping styles to deal with stress within and outside of school. Among the less adaptive strategies are suppression, rumination, avoidance, and negative self-thinking. More adaptive strategies include behavioral distraction, optimism, problem solving, positive reappraisal, and detached mindfulness. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has good support as an intervention for use with children and adolescents to improve self-regulation. Newer approaches include mindfulness, acceptance, and emotion coaching. Specialized interventions for coping with anxiety, depression, and anger management are reviewed.

Interventions are the focus of the next two chapters. Chapter 9 suggests various ways in which school psychologists and other mental health workers in schools can support teachers and parents. A particularly important variable in helping children develop good emotion regulation has to do with how adults react to children's negative emotions. It is clearly important for adults to correctly 'read' a child's temperament and emotional style and to respond appropriately. For example, researchers have paid particular attention to the parenting styles of those adults who have highly anxious children. These reticent children influence their parents, who then become overprotective. Parents and teachers have to teach emotion vocabulary and talk with students about emotions. Emotion coaching is a style of interacting that can be used by both parents and teachers.

Teachers also have to be more aware of differences among their students so that their reactions will be appropriate and helpful and not add to their students' stress. In classrooms where the climate is positive, these students are both supported and protected. Interventions that are helpful for children as they develop emotion regulation skills include stress reduction, emotion coaching, modeling, and direct teaching of coping skills. Today we have the added pressure of dealing with students from diverse backgrounds. When a child's

family culture does not match the predominant culture of the school, considerable stress can be placed on the child, the family, and the school. Issues around culture, gender, and various student handicapping conditions make helping children develop emotion regulation a considerable challenge.

It is clear that the same tools, strategies, and techniques are not appropriate for students of all ages and ability levels. Tools used to assist children and adolescents to regulate emotion and behavior may have to be adapted to increase the likelihood that they will be used. It is particularly important to adapt tools for young children. Cognitive interventions have been shown to be particularly useful for adolescents and adults, and many of these tools can be easily adapted so that they can be used effectively with younger schoolchildren. Some easily adapted techniques involve, for example, number scales, mantras, self-talk, acceptance, problem solving, and fear hierarchies. A few tools designed for juveniles with autism spectrum disorders or learning disabilities can also be used for those with weak emotion regulation. Interventions described Chapter 10 range from 'quick' tools for young people with mild emotion regulation problems to more complex techniques for students with significant weaknesses in emotion regulation.

General and practical information for school psychologists who want to establish both targeted and intensive interventions for students with poor emotion regulation can be found in Chapter 11. Although boys and girls who have more extreme difficulty with emotional regulation stand out in the school setting, tools are needed to identify both the student who has more moderate needs and the more specific skills that a student may have to master. Generalization and transfer (carrying over skills taught in one environment to different environments) must be directly addressed. Finally, the major steps in providing treatment for problems in emotion regulation are specified.

Several individuals have been enormously helpful in the preparation of this text. Two young artists, Hunter Ward and Summer Ward, deserve special thanks. Sandra Ward, a talented medical editor, provided many ideas for organizing and strengthening the readability of the text. Janet Lemnah meticulously read and corrected the manuscript, identifying errors and changes that were needed. Few people have her ability to attend to detail in the same way. Most of all, Dick Macklem supported me in this project both emotionally and by reviewing text. Without his strong encouragement and support it would never have been completed. The work and support of these individuals is deeply appreciated.

It is hoped that this text will prove to be a practical tool for school psychologists and other mental health workers in school environments. The worksheets and handouts included may be copied for the use of the individual practitioner as long as the source is correctly identified. They may not be used for any purpose other than helping an individual student and his or her family and may not be reprinted or distributed for any other reason.