There's More to **Emotional Self-Regulation** Than Meets the Eye

Teaching self-regulation skills to young students has to go beyond praise and censure.

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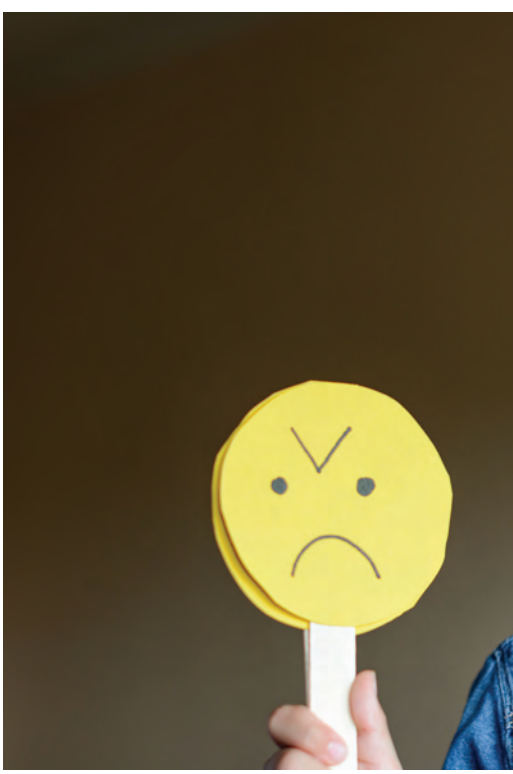

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It was the first week of 1st grade, and Sophie was tired and distracted after a mostly sleepless night, but glad to be in the calm classroom where she felt safer. Since her father lost his job during the COVID-19 pandemic and was home all of the time now, the arguments and drinking in her house had escalated. Last night, Sophie retreated to her room feeling afraid and "frozen" as her father yelled at her mother. She still felt "on edge" and didn't want anyone to become angry.

Sophie went through the motions of everything her teacher, Mr. Murphy, asked her class to do, but she wasn't fully present. Meanwhile, Mr. Murphy was also having a challenging day, as two other students were incredibly active and disruptive. Mr. Murphy wasn't sure how to help them regulate their behavior and engage. He thought to himself, "I wonder what I can do differently for these two. How do I help all of my students be as regulated as Sophie?"

Self-regulation skills may have more of an effect on children's outcomes later in life than almost any other factor, including intelligence (e.g., Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). We self-regulate when we moderate our thoughts, emotions, and behavior in order to reach a short- or long-term goal or standard (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004).

Children show self-regulation skills when they are disappointed at a change in a routine but have the cognitive flexibility and adaptability to "go with the flow" or when they ignore a distraction and make a choice to stay engaged. The ability to regulate our emotions prepares us to empathize with others, communicate effectively, react to change by adapting, and resolve conflict logically and with intention.

The need for emotional regulation has never been more widespread in our lifetime than during the current pandemic. Nearly everyone

is feeling new stress or trauma, whether from a lost job, job pressures, lack of social interaction, financial uncertainty, health concerns, or grief from the loss of a loved one. The changes in school formats require flexibility, and for some of the students we serve, extended time at home is significantly traumatic because of conflict or abuse. Our emotional self-regulation is being tested like never before.

What's happening beneath the surface of emotional regulation is neurologically complex—far more complex than a choice of behaviors, and often not a conscious choice at all.

Compliance Isn't the End Game

Emotional self-regulation is unfortunately often conflated with compliance. We may think a student has poor self-regulation if they have hyperactive or impulsive behaviors, talk too much, or become visibly angry or sad. But quiet and compliant should never be confused with alert and engaged. The former is the behavior we see, but the latter involves a neurological state. Two students may be having completely different states of emotional arousal and stress, but their behavior may look the same to an observer. Or a disengaged student who is experiencing the greatest amount of stress may appear to be engaged—as in Sophie's case—and slip through the cracks. It was in part *because* Sophie was completely overburdened with stress and unable to engage that she was so quiet and compliant.

When we apply an oversimplified definition of emotional self-regulation as merely choosing to control behavior in the wake of an emotion, we go down the misguided path of only reinforcing or punishing behaviors instead of teaching regulation skills. This misunderstanding of self-regulation as a choice leads to unhelpful comments such as, "Thank you for working quietly" or "That's not a good choice." When we support or condemn behavior without going deeper, we neglect students' real social-emotional learning needs. We don't only want students to *appear* alert and engaged; we want to support their ability to *be* alert and engaged.

Reframing Challenging Behaviors

Challenging behaviors that teachers experience in their classrooms can be categorized as internalizing or externalizing. Externalizing behaviors, like yelling, hitting, or crying, are the first to gain our attention, because they disrupt our ability to teach and sometimes present a safety issue for other students. Internalizing behaviors, on the other hand, present a greater threat to the student experiencing them. Both behaviors exhibit a need and provide an opportunity for us to teach self-regulation skills.

What's happening beneath the surface of emotional regulation is neurologically complex—far more complex than a choice of behaviors and often not a conscious choice at all, especially in early childhood. The brain's prefrontal cortex (the front third of the brain) is where logical decision making and planning happens. Regulation skills like impulse control, attention, reactivity, and flexibility are governed by the prefrontal cortex and its relationship with other parts of the brain, like the amygdala. Our amygdala is designed to keep us alive and is responsible for our emotions, but it can sure cause us problems. Because the prefrontal cortex is among the last of the cortical structures to reach maturity (Fuster, 2008), we continue to develop self-regulation skills into young adulthood. In the meantime, the amygdala is ready to step in and act, often in maladaptive ways that we regret.

When a person is feeling threatened in some way, his thinking moves away from the logical prefrontal cortex portion to the emotional amygdala, which is also responsible for the "fight, flight, or freeze" response. This

can lead to maladaptive responses.

The brain rapidly develops in early childhood in response to a child's experiences. This wonderful opportunity is also a vulnerability when there is great stress or trauma in the environment (e.g., Thompson, 2014). For students who have post-traumatic stress disorder from multiple adverse childhood events, or ACEs, the move from thinking logically to the fight, flight, or freeze response can happen much more quickly. Their responses may be triggered even in contexts that may not seem threatening. For example, if Sophie's teacher raised his voice, Sophie could feel the same freeze response she felt the night before when she heard her father yelling.

Although there are strategies we can put into place to build emotional-regulation skills, we as educators must first reframe the way we think about challenging behaviors so we see them as possible neurological responses of students' sympathetic (flight and flight) and parasympathetic (freeze) systems rather than behavioral choices. Our work, then, becomes supporting a different way of thinking, rather than purely a different way of behaving. Put another way, self-regulation includes being able to control our behavior within the context of feeling a strong emotion. It's not always a choice (when we are unable to do so, this is often because we were unable to move thinking back to the prefrontal cortex), but there are strategies that can help.

The goal in teaching self-regulation skills, then, is to support the child, over time, to be able to shift between emotional states and primarily use the logical prefrontal cortex rather than the emotional amygdala to govern their behaviors.

For a 3rd grade student who has been expressing anger by saying hurtful things to others, teaching a new response may involve talking about how anger feels and rehearsing specific phrases to use when that feeling surfaces. We may teach the child to say, "I need a minute" and to walk away and cool down (allowing thinking to move back to the prefrontal cortex). We can set a goal with this student and measure progress to increase the likelihood that the strategies will work.

For Sophie, developing new regulation skills could mean purposefully putting into place strategies so that she feels safe and is able to engage and make mistakes without fear of anger. In each of these cases, we help the student identify how the emotion feels, select an alternative response, set a goal, and celebrate successes.

As with any academic goal, students have individual strengths and needs in self-regulation that we can meet in personalized and differentiated ways.

Delaying a Response

Trying to teach self-regulation when a student is feeling a strong emotion or is seriously misbehaving (which might seem to be a teachable moment) is most often the *worst* time to do so. In that moment, a child may be unable to even identify their feelings, much less plan a logical response they should have made. Our most immediate goal at that time of heightened stress is to support the child to shift from thinking with their amygdala back to thinking with their prefrontal cortex. It is only after we reduce the stress, and the student is in a calm state, that the cognitive ability to solve the problem is available. This often means delaying a response to give time for an emotion to decrease in intensity—and is why time-based strategies such as counting to 20 or leaving the situation for a few minutes are often effective.

A Framework for Support

Research spanning neuroscience and child development has yielded important lessons on how we can set children on the right course toward healthy emotional regulation, beginning in early childhood. From infancy through 3rd grade, the use of emotional-regulation strategies becomes more or less complex, depending on a child's age and developmental level (Domitrovich, Moore, & Thompson, 2012).

With experience and the right kind of support from caregivers and teachers, we can mediate harmful factors, such as trauma, to gradually give students the skills they need. The following three strategies offer a framework for supporting emotional regulation in an early-grade classroom.

1 *Build a Safe Environment with a Trustworthy, Caring Teacher*

Any emotional-regulation strategy is likely to fail in the absence of warm, caring relationships within the classroom. Students who believe their teachers are competent and trustworthy achieve at accelerated levels (Hattie, 2018), and they mediate daily stressors better when they are in a caring environment where teachers guide and mentor, rather than simply reward and punish (Crouch, Keys, & McMahon, 2014). To support emotional regulation, a caring teacher empathizes with the student's feelings and guides the use of strategies to reduce stress and respond with intentional behavior.

As we react to these emotional times, we have to manage our *own* emotions and co-regulate and guide learning in this area (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). Responding consistently and with a caring demeanor, even when we feel annoyed or angry, is easier said than done. A teacher's use of public punishment or shame, as with behavior charts, is a quick route to a damaged relationship and obliterated credibility (Jung & Smith, 2018). In the opening example, for Sophie to feel safe and supported in school, Mr. Murphy has to demonstrate his own self-regulation and earn her trust.

2 *Demonstrate Emotional Self-Regulation with Examples of Success*

Students' achievement across content increases when teachers are clear about the knowledge, skills, and values that are important for students to have (Hattie, 2018). We can invest in labeling emotions and identifying how they feel and how they look in others, explain self-regulation, give clear success criteria, and provide examples. With the youngest children, we can use exaggerated facial expressions (in times of low stress) to label and describe emotions and begin to teach how to respond to emotions in others.

For example, Mr. Murphy might use a social story (a narrative of how the behavior should look) to offer students clarity on the appropriate ways to respond during difficult situations when emotions run high. If a student is having difficulty with impulsively stopping a task and talking with friends off topic, the story might read, "When the assignment feels too hard, I want to avoid the task and talk to my friends instead. But I don't do that. I concentrate and stay focused to finish the task. I feel so accomplished! Now, I can take a break." During times when difficult situations arise, Mr. Murphy could support his students by using words from the social story to help a student remember and use

the planned response. Over time, students internalize the strategies and use them independently.

3 *Mentor Students to Set and Self-Assess Emotional Self-Regulation Goals*

As with any academic goal, students have individual strengths and needs in self-regulation that we can meet in personalized and differentiated ways. Children are most committed to their goals when they set them themselves, with the mentorship of a teacher (Hattie, 2018). We can use the power of goal setting beyond typical academic applications to facilitate emotional regulation with our students, beginning as early as kindergarten.

For the two students who were disruptive, Mr. Murphy may have noticed that one need is to increase persistence. He could identify how long the students engage before becoming disruptive, guide them in supportive conversation about stamina and learning, and lead them to set their own goals for increased duration of engagement. Sophie may set a goal of speaking up more during small group instruction or being mindful and present during lessons. Mr. Murphy can help guide the students to think of options they can use when they lose engagement and help make their progress visible as their persistence increases.

Students in later early childhood can, with our help, engage in metacognitive strategies that help them reflect on what works to support their emotional regulation. We can advise students by reflecting with them on their progress toward goals in recent times of high emotion and whether they used the strategies that support moving toward those goals. With enough practice, students can identify for themselves when to use a particular strategy.

A Balanced Trajectory

Children often have little control of the emotions they feel. But with the right environment and support, students can learn how to manage those emotions and respond and interact in ways that aren't harmful. When early-grade educators invest in self-regulation skills, they set children on a trajectory that makes them more likely to persist, adapt, engage, identify, and manage their emotions throughout their lives. Although self-regulation may not appear on your school's report card or directly influence test scores, it may be the most important skill set we give our young children because of its far-reaching effects. EL

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REFLECT & DISCUSS

How have you seen students' emotions affect the ways in which they learn and behave in the classroom?

Which of the three strategies for supporting emotional regulation in the early-childhood classroom might you start implementing first? How do you plan to do so?

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