

CENTRE FOR AUTISM  
MIDDLETOWN

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## Emotional Regulation and Autistic Children and Young People

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## Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is a life-long developmental process underlying attention and social engagement, and is essential for optimal social, emotional and communication development and the development of relationships for all.

It is during early childhood that children significantly develop skills to regulate their arousal, emotional response, control over their mental processing such as problem solving, motivational patterns (Bronson 2002)

**Self Regulation:** the ability to independently attain an optimal level of arousal.  
**Mutual Regulation:** the ability to solicit and secure assistance from others in regulating one's arousal level. (Prizant et al, 2005)



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## Self-Management of Emotions

Ability to maintain a 'well-regulated' emotional state

- ❖ Recognise oneself is having an emotional response
  - be able to manage own emotions effectively
  - be able to modify the emotion by thinking about the situation differently
  - be able to tolerate difficult situations and feelings

Autistic individual needs to have their own emotional toolbox filled with strategies which they can use daily.




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## Emotional Dysregulation

- Supportive adults to observe the actions and responses of the autistic individual- these will communicate they are struggling and failing to access strategies to self regulate; **Emotional Dysregulation** (Berkovits et al, 2016)
- The term Emotional Dysregulation is not often used in autism literature, instead the behavioural symptoms that represent emotion dysregulation are used instead, e.g. tantrum, meltdown, outburst, aggression and self-injury behaviour (Berkovits et al, 2016)
- Behaviour signs of emotional dysregulation can be externalised or internalised and they can happen very quickly or slowly over a period of time.
- These behaviours are not planned.




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## Why is Emotional Expression Difficult for Autistic Children?

- These skills aren't typically taught to any individual, rather are implicitly 'picked-up' from cues in the environment.
- Autistic child needs to be explicitly taught these skills.
- Autistic individual ...
  - may not have had positive emotional experiences
  - does not recognise how emotions feel therefore cannot identify their internal states
  - makes semantic errors in labelling emotions e.g. says 'angry' meaning 'worried'
  - does not perceive others as a source of help or emotional assistance
  - additional difficulty expressing and appropriately communicating need.




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## Supporting Emotional Regulation


- Supportive adult needs to tune into to autistic individual's emotions and model emotional expressions:
  - use visual supports to remind the autistic individual how to express emotion
  - provide choice of coping strategies to enhance regulation.
- According to Vermeulen (2015) another difficulty with autism and responding to emotions, is knowing when, where, when not and where not to respond; this requires context sensitivity.



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## Emotion Thermometers





	How I feel	What I can do
5	Panic has set in!	See my teacher. Take a 2 minute walk in the class.
4	I know this stuff but I can't remember.	STOP. Put down my pencil. Put head down and breathe for 30-60 seconds.
3	This task is too hard!	Breathe and try to relax.
2	Okay some questions I might double check.	Slow down! Read carefully and look for things I know.
1	Calm- I know this!	Keep going!

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## Proactive Regulatory Strategies

These are strategies which support an autistic child to maintain a well-regulated state so they are able to participate in daily activities.

- Visual schedule- consistent use of a daily schedule and/or visual supports to support transitions throughout the day. Use verbal and gestural cues to direct attention if needed.
- Within task schedules or checklists- visual support or structured tasks to provide a clear breakdown of activity steps, may be simply written or drawn on a wipe off board, other autistic children may need concrete structured tasks
- Visual timers- Use a visual timer especially for activities that don't have a clear end point (e.g., breaks, reading, play etc.)
- Breaks – adhere to predetermined proactive out-of-class break schedule

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## Proactive Regulatory Strategies

- Social Stories or comic strip conversations–review Social Stories daily and as needed throughout the day with a particular focus prior to challenging activities, provide ample visual supports to support understanding and comprehension of academics and social situations.
- Ensure access to a variety of communication forms
- Allow processing time
- Model positive self-talk

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## Strategies to support Mild Dysregulation

Strategies that are deemed to be appropriate interventions that will help the student who is mildly dysregulated to reengage

<p><b>Mutual Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reorient to work by calling name</li> <li>-Give clear instruction of work to be completed by using visual cues</li> <li>-First/then board</li> <li>-Shoulder rub</li> <li>-Provision of fidget toy</li> <li>-Chair or wall press</li> </ul>	<p><b>Self Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to first/then board</li> <li>-Mark off work as completed on schedule or count down list</li> <li>-Use of fidget toy or stress kit</li> </ul>
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## Examples of Calm Kits






www.disabilityaids.co.uk

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## Strategies to Support to Moderate Dysregulation

Moderate "on the spot" strategies should include both mutual regulatory and self regulatory strategies and be focused on helping the student to calm and refocus or to take a break from the activity or environment

<p><b>Mutual Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Decrease language based directions. Increase use of visual supports</li> <li>- Support identification of cues related to arousal/emotional changes using visual support (e.g., emotion icon board or emotion thermometer)</li> <li>- Offer appropriate sensory strategies based (e.g., chewy toy, textured fidget)</li> <li>- Provide choice of where child would like to complete his work</li> <li>- Offer joint compressions/ deep pressure</li> <li>- Engage in doing an errand that requires the child to leave the environment</li> <li>- Direct to calm area</li> </ul>	<p><b>Self Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Access to first/then board</li> <li>-Use of relaxation strategies rehearsed each day; deep breathing, count to 10, squeeze hands</li> <li>-Gum/chewy candy/ sucking from water bottle</li> <li>-Looking at preferred book/comic</li> <li>-Sensory strategies involving repetition, rhythm, and pressure</li> <li>-Listening to music on headphones</li> <li>-Creative destruction (e.g., recycling – tearing boxes)</li> <li>-Headphones/earplugs</li> </ul>
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## Sensory Resource

**Sensory Processing Resource**

<https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/>

General sensory strategies for all  
<https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies/general-sensory-strategies-for-all/>

Strategies according to sense  
<https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/sensory-strategies/strategies-according-to-sense/>

Resources  
<https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/resources/>

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## Recovery Strategies

Should include both mutual regulatory and self regulatory strategies and be focused on helping the child to recover and reengage.

<p><b>Mutual Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Use minimal language to redirect</li> <li>-Clearly convey to the child that assistance or help is available "I'm going to help you."</li> <li>- Support child in leaving the environment/activity</li> <li>- Use visual supports to convey expectation "time for..."</li> <li>- Engage child in conversation only when he/she gives indication that they are better organised and ready</li> </ul>	<p><b>Self Regulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Calm area or chill zone</li> <li>- Listen to music</li> <li>- Look preferred book</li> <li>- Calming routine/ relaxation strategies when able</li> </ul>
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## Self Regulation Scripts

- Key component of self regulation is internalised self-talk – can be especially difficult for autistic children
- Goal – use everyday activities to avail of as many opportunities as possible for child to engage in the script with supporting adult
- Initially adult led – once child or young person gains competence the script language can change to questions
- Aim is for the child to internalise the script so it becomes a self-regulatory thought process
- Support implementation with use of visual reminder cards/posters

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## Remember!

- Modify to suit needs of autistic individual e.g. words/ pictures
- Scripts should be pleasant – do not use negative terminology
- Used routinely and regularly within appropriate situations to support internalisation
- E.g. new tasks/activities – elicit the hard/easy script  
 stressful situations – elicit the big deal/little deal script
- Build positive associations with the script – two under positive conditions for every one under stressful conditions
- Prioritise scripts – don't overwhelm
- Careful consideration of when its appropriate to reduce adult support for a script

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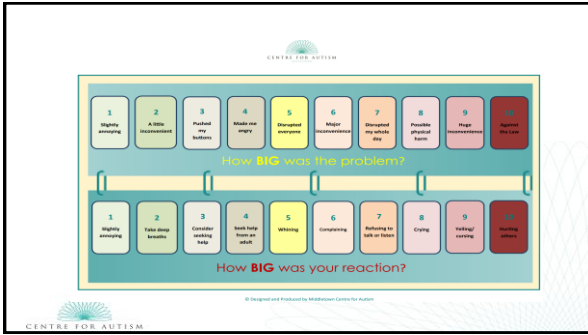
## Big Deal/Little Deal Script

Script:

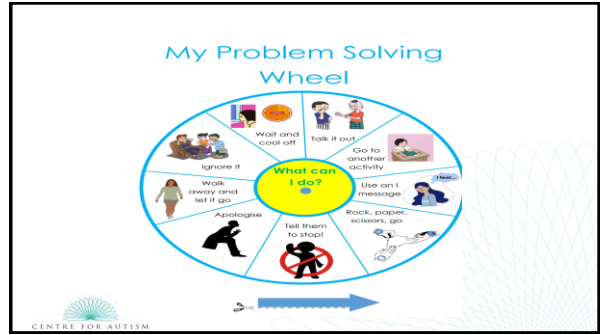
1. Identify/label the issue (e.g., "This not a big deal – this is just a little deal – this is not important")
2. State the reason (e.g., "This is just a little deal because we can .....")
3. Offer a strategy (e.g., "Maybe we can just wipe this yogurt up with a napkin")
4. General reassurance (e.g., "There we go. You see, that was not a big deal. That was just a little deal. And there's always something that works, isn't there?")

Gradually reduce external support as it becomes possible to do so.

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### Hard to do / Easy to do

Script:

1. Identify/label the issue (e.g., "This is kind of hard to do, isn't it?" – or medium hard or pretty easy)
2. State the reason (e.g., "It's hard/easy to do because...")
3. Offer a strategy (e.g., "Maybe you should ask for help? Or ...." Or "It's easy because you did ...")
4. General reassurance (e.g., "Great; that was kind of hard to do – but you asked for help and we did it. There's always something that works, isn't there?")

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### Choice / No Choice

Script:

1. Identify/label the issue (e.g., "You have a choice here; or You know this is a no choice situation.")
2. State the reason (e.g., "This is a no choice deal because....")
3. Offer a strategy (e.g., "Here is what we can do to get through this....")
4. General reassurance (e.g., "There we go. You see, there's always something that works, isn't there?")

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### Zones of Regulation – Emotional Regulation

The *Zones of Regulation* is a curriculum used to support students gain skills in consciously regulating their actions; this allows them to develop problem solving abilities and increase their ability to control their emotional responses.

The curriculum helps students recognise when they are in different emotional states called 'zones', represented by a different colour. Students learn strategies or tools to stay in a zone or move from one to another. Students explore calming techniques, cognitive strategies, and sensory supports so they will have a toolbox of methods to use to move between zones.

Interview with Leah Kuypers – short version  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj9tUNctOK>

Interview with Leah Kuypers – long version  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvihQXZa8>

• Free printable Handouts  
<https://www.zonesofregulation.com/free-downloadable-handouts1.html>

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### Additional Links to Resources

- Best Practice Resource - <https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/>
- Printable resources such as Incredible 5 points scale, emotion thermometers and breathing visual supports - <http://best-practice.middletownautism.com/links-and-resources/videos/>
- Sensory Resource - <https://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/>
- Creating a calm area - <https://www.middletownautism.com/social-media/creating-a-calm-area-7-2020>
- Calming strategies and Mindfulness based techniques - <https://www.middletownautism.com/social-media/mindfulness-resources-6-2020>
- Co-regulation strategies - [https://www.middletownautism.com/files/shares/Sara/Co-Regulation\\_Strategies.pdf](https://www.middletownautism.com/files/shares/Sara/Co-Regulation_Strategies.pdf)

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