



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is when you can notice your big feelings and calm yourself down before you do something you wish you hadn't. **Babies and toddlers can't do this yet.** They act on their feelings right away. Self-regulation takes a long time to develop. **Young children learn it slowly, with help from a calm adult.** It's hard to stay calm when your child is not. Here's what to do and how to do it.

When your child has big upset feelings, they can't learn or think clearly. But you can help them calm down. The first step is always **co-regulation**, which means your calm helps your child get calm. Once they are settled, they can learn again.

Some things that help:

Understand what they can and can't do. Big feelings are very hard for young children. They are not yet able to remember every rule each time. They don't always understand what will happen when they do something they shouldn't. They also can't stop themselves, even when they know they should.

Stay calm. The part of the brain that helps us calm down is not built yet in young children. They need the help of your adult brain. It helps to notice when you start to feel upset. Remember that your child needs you to stay calm. Take a few deep breaths before you say anything, as long as everyone is safe.

Set clear rules. Say the rules in a clear way, and say them often. Use the same rules every day, because it will take your child time to learn them.



Use words and actions together. Words by themselves don't always work. Try a calm, low voice along with shaking your head. Or hold up your hand as you say "stop." Words paired with actions help your child follow what you say.

Be patient. Young children need to hear things many times before they understand. Sometimes the answer is simply time to grow. Trust that your child will get there.

Name what they want and feel. Use words to show your child you understand. Try saying, "You want another cookie. I said just one. That makes you mad." Let them know their feelings make sense, because sometimes the choices we give them are not the ones they wish for.

Take a break. Sometimes, trying to soothe your child only makes it worse, and a break can help them calm down. A break is not a punishment, but a chance for them to catch their breath.

Help your child learn to self-soothe. Helping your child calm down is not giving in or spoiling them. You are teaching them an important skill. Some children calm down with a hug or by being rocked, because they need that touch to relax. Other children need to jump up and down to let out their energy.

Staying calm is hard to do. For your child to learn it, they need to see you do it.

Have more questions? Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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