

PARENTING · PRINTABLE GUIDE

Emotional Regulation Activities for Kids



Playful, evidence-based activities that teach children to notice, name, and calm big feelings, so meltdowns shrink and self-control grows over time.

Reviewed by Michael Callans, MSW · Published June 27, 2026

What this tool does

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice a feeling, understand it, and respond to it in a manageable way rather than being swept away by it. It is one of the strongest predictors of how children fare in school, friendships, and later life, and it is a skill, which means it can be taught and practiced. Children are not born able to calm themselves. The brain region that manages strong emotion keeps developing into the mid-twenties, so what looks like willful misbehavior is often a young nervous system that is genuinely overwhelmed.

Kids learn to regulate through co-regulation first: a calm adult helps them settle, again and again, until they can do it themselves. The activities below build the pieces of that skill. Some teach emotional literacy, the simple but powerful ability to name what you feel, which research links to calmer

responses. Others teach the body-based tools that bring an activated nervous system back down, such as slow breathing, movement, and sensory grounding.

The key is to practice when everyone is calm. A child in full meltdown cannot learn a new skill, just as none of us can study during a fire alarm. By playing these as games during peaceful moments, you build the pathways your child can reach for later. Over weeks and months, you will see the gap between feeling and reaction widen, which is exactly what growing self-control looks like.

Go at your child's pace and keep it light. Praise effort, not just success. The goal is not a child who never gets upset, which is neither possible nor healthy, but a child who is slowly learning what to do with big feelings when they come.

How to use it

- 1** Pick one or two activities to start, from the naming, calming, or self-control lists, rather than trying everything at once.
- 2** Practice during calm, willing moments, and frame each activity as a game, not a lesson.
- 3** Join in yourself, since children learn regulation mostly by copying the adults around them.
- 4** When a big feeling hits, use the in-the-moment routine: name it, stay close, pick a calming tool together, wait for the wave to pass.
- 5** Praise every small effort to settle, and expect progress to be slow and uneven. That is how the skill grows.

Naming feelings (emotional literacy)

- Feelings check-in: at dinner, everyone names a feeling from the day and why.
- Make a feelings chart with faces, and point to how you feel each morning.
- Read picture books about emotions and pause to name what characters feel.
- Play feelings charades: act out an emotion for others to guess.
- Use a feelings thermometer: is the feeling small, medium, or huge right now?

Calming the body

- Balloon breathing: breathe in to fill your belly like a balloon, slowly let it out.
- Blow bubbles, real or imaginary, to make breaths slow and long.
- Squeeze and release: tense your whole body for five seconds, then go floppy.
- Animal moves: stomp like an elephant or curl up small like a turtle to shift energy.
- Cozy wrap: bundle up in a blanket and feel snug and safe.

Building self-control (games)

- Red light, green light, or freeze dance, to practice stopping and starting on cue.
- Simon Says, which builds the pause between hearing and acting.
- Take turns being the leader, to practice waiting and patience.
- Beat the timer: see if you can stay calm or quiet until the sand runs out.
- Build a glitter jar together and watch it settle, like a feeling settling down.

A simple in-the-moment routine

- 1 Name it: help your child say what they feel (you seem really frustrated).
- 2 Stay close and calm, since your child borrows your steadiness first.
- 3 Pick a calming tool together: a few balloon breaths, a squeeze, or movement.
- 4 Wait for the wave to pass before talking about what happened.
- 5 Afterward, praise any effort to calm down, however small.

What to expect

Progress is slow and uneven, and that is normal. A child who managed a feeling beautifully on Monday may fall apart on Tuesday, because regulation depends on sleep, hunger, and how full the day's stress cup already is. Keep practicing during calm moments, keep modeling it yourself, and look for progress over months rather than days.

Sources

- Siegel DJ, Bryson TP. The Whole-Brain Child. Delacorte Press; 2011.
- Gross JJ. Emotion regulation: current status and future prospects. Psychol Inq. 2015;26(1):1-26.
- Center on the Developing Child. Building the brain's air traffic control system. Harvard University; 2011.

Want help building these skills?

A child therapist can teach you and your child practical emotion-regulation tools that last. Free to search our directory. Start at psychology.com/therapist.

These activities are educational parenting tools, not therapy or a diagnosis. If your child's emotional outbursts are frequent, intense, or causing real distress at home or school, please reach out to a pediatrician or a licensed mental-health professional. In an emergency, call your local emergency number or, in the US, call or text 988.

© Psychology.com · free to print and share

psychology.com/tools/emotional-regulation-kids