

## Resiliency and Young Children Providing Opportunities to Build Skills: Emotional Regulation

### What is resiliency?

Resiliency is the ability to cope with new or stressful situations, changes, problems, or opportunities. Resilient children use skills that they have developed from past experiences to cope better with new situations as they arise. These help them to adapt to new situations and continue to learn new coping skills that they can use in the future.

### Why is resilience important?

Life is not stress free. All people experience stress, change, problems, and opportunities in their lives. Caregivers can help children learn skills to deal with stress. Children can start learning these skills at a very young age.

### What are resiliency skills?

People who are resilient have three main abilities. These are the ability to relax, reflect, and respond. These can be further broken down into seven resiliency skills. Each skill forms the basis on which other skills can be built. These include emotional regulation, impulse control, causal analysis, empathy, realistic optimism, self-efficacy, and reaching out.

It is important for children to learn resiliency skills when they are not experiencing stress. When we experience stress, different areas of our brains are activated and the areas that are in charge of learning are not working at their best level. If children learn resiliency skills when they are calm, they are more likely to retain the information and to use the skills when needed.

### Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation simply means understanding our emotions, naming our emotions, and being in charge of them.

The following are practical strategies to help children develop emotional regulation:

### *Learning How to Relax and Calm Oneself* MODEL

- Stay calm in stressful situations. Children, especially young children, will regulate their emotions to yours. If you are scared, they are likely to feel scared too.
- Talk to children about your own emotions and what they feel like. For example, do your shoulders get tight when you are angry? Do you feel sick to your stomach when you are nervous? Do you feel like you have cotton balls in your head when you are confused?
- Practice each of the strategies in this fact sheet with children. When you are using any of the strategies throughout the day, talk to children about what you are doing and why. For example, "I felt really worried when school told me that you had hurt yourself on the playground. I had to sit down and take some deep breaths so that I could feel calmer and come and get you."
- When children are successful at using any of the strategies, praise them for this and talk about how it helped.
- Model self-talk. For example, "that was a pretty big clap of thunder. It made me feel a little scared. It is okay though. It was just the noise that scared me. Thunder can't hurt me."

### For More Information

#### Contact:

1319 Colony Street  
Saskatoon, SK S7N 2Z1  
Bus. 306.651.4300  
Fax. 306.651.4301  
info@skprevention.ca  
www.skprevention.ca

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## DEEP BREATHING

- When you breathe deeply, your stomach should move. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic system. This is sometimes referred to as the relaxation response and is the opposite of when our sympathetic system is activated in times of stress.
- Using dish soap mixed with water and a plastic bubble blowing form, teach children to breathe in and then out slowly in order to blow a big bubble.
- Laughter is contagious and a natural way to breathe deeply. Lay children in a row with their head on the stomach of the person in front of them. When the first person in line starts to laugh, it will “catch on” and all the children will end up laughing.
- Older children can be taught deep breathing by having them breathe in and then out slowly enough so that their outgoing air flow does not blow out a candle.
- Have children put their hands over their stomachs while breathing in deeply for a count of four and breathing out for a count of four. If they are deep breathing, they will be able to feel their stomachs move.
- Ask children to have cotton ball races, by blowing them across a table.
- Blow up a balloon and have children release the air from it as slowly as they possibly can. This can be used in conjunction with counted breathing or to teach children that instead of “exploding” with emotion, that it is better to let it out slowly.

## RELAXING THE BODY

- Progressive relaxation teaches children what their body feels like when it is clenched and stressed, and what it feels like relaxed. Children can do this when sitting or standing. Talking in a soothing voice, have children tense each part of their body, e.g., squeezing their fists together, then release the tension. This can also help children fall asleep and is a skill that can be practiced at bedtime.
- Have children lie on the ground and pull all their toes towards them and count to ten. Next, have them release their toes and count to ten. Repeat.

## MOVEMENT

- Running, jumping rope, and other forms of active play can release chemicals caused by stress and help children relax.
- Making music or listening and dancing to music can do the same as above.
- Stretching can calm tense muscles.

## GUIDED IMAGERY

- Visualization can help children to ignore stream of conscious talk (the chatter in our minds that happens when we are stressed). When children actively imagine a safe place that they like to be in, they relax both their bodies and minds.

## TOUCH

- One of the easiest ways we can help children regulate their emotions is by hugging them. Cuddling with a safe person can also help to calm children.
- Cuddling a pet can also help relax children.
- With small children, holding them close to your body so that they can hear your heart beat can be soothing.

## NAMING AND EXPRESSING FEELINGS

- Validate children’s feelings.
- Use feeling words throughout the day.
- From an early age, teach children to name and talk about their emotions.
- At dinner, have each person at the table talk about one good thing and one not so good thing that happened that day. Ask them how they felt in both situations.
- Cut out pictures of people feeling different emotions and talk about it with your children. You can also use storybook, movie, or TV characters to start this conversation.
- Have your child draw where in their body they are feeling emotions and how their face looks with different emotions. You can also use various posters with different emotional faces on them.
- Help children learn how to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts, for example, “The dog knocked over my tower. He ruined it!” “I bet we can work together to make a new tower.”

## References

Available upon request.