



*Solutions* is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

## Emotion Regulation Skills- More Important Than Ever

As April arrives with milder weather and longer days, students and teachers alike typically begin the happy countdown to summer break. This year, however, parents and teachers are attempting to manage their own stress, while helping to ease anxious students back into the classroom. Now, more than ever, it is important to build and strengthen your child's Emotion Regulation (ER) skills, as these play a critical role in academic success, and in fostering mental wellness.

ER strategies focus on attention, emotional knowledge, and the awareness and management of the physical sensations and behaviors associated with various emotions. Some ER skills are focused on helping a child avoid intense emotional dysregulation, and others are intended to lessen the physical sensations and self-defeating behaviors that can arise when intense emotions occur.

Here are some ideas about how to help your child build and strength ER skills:

- The ability to label, understand and express emotions are critical aspects of ER. Encourage your child to label and express emotions throughout the day: when reading a story or watching a tv show, you might ask "What do you think this character is feeling at this point in the story?" When observing family interactions, you might say "How do you think your sister felt when you ignored her request?" or "How do you feel right now?" Post a feelings wheel or feelings chart in the home to help your child develop a rich emotional vocabulary.
- To regulate emotion, individuals must learn to notice and describe the physical sensations, thoughts, and behaviors that accompany various emotions ("I'm jittery, I'm thinking that my friend should have called by now, I can't stop pacing and checking my phone, I'm feeling hurt and anxious"). It is important to ACCEPT and TOLERATE all emotions without judgment, even uncomfortable or painful emotions. Do not label emotions as "good" or "bad", "positive" or "negative". Encourage your child to name and face both pleasant and difficult emotions instead of avoiding them.
- Help your child understand that ALL emotions play a useful function. A painful emotion such as sadness or hurt might mean that a change is needed, e.g., to leave an

unhealthy friendship, to seek help, or to improve self-care. Anxiety and fear help us identify and move away from dangerous situations. Overwhelmed and confused feelings might motivate us to seek information, or to work harder.

- You can help your children reduce their vulnerability to emotional dysregulation by teaching them to take care of their bodies: healthy eating, good sleep habits, and regular exercise increase the ability to tolerate difficult emotions and to "ride the wave" of emotional ups and downs WITHOUT resorting to problem behaviors such as frequent tantrums, substance use, suicidal thoughts/actions, self-harm, disordered eating, or lashing out at others.
- Practice simple grounding techniques with your child, e.g., paced breathing exercises, to help them calm the physical sensations that often accompany difficult emotions.
- Teach your child to "cope ahead" by planning for upcoming stressful situations. Help him visualize an upcoming situation (like returning to the classroom as school reopens), imagining both the emotions (e.g., fear, a knot in the stomach) and possible coping strategies (smile at a friend, ask teacher for help).
- Help your child develop and use a list of activities and experiences that boost mood and generate pleasant emotions – e.g., listening to music, talking to a friend, taking a walk, hugging the family pet, watching funny videos, taking a bubble bath, shooting hoops, writing in a journal, drinking a cup of tea, etc.
- Ask teachers about classroom-based ER strategies so that you can help your child practice these at home.

### Resources:

Rathus, J. H. and Miller, A. L. (2015) DBT Skills Manual for Adolescents.