



11 WAYS TO HELP KIDS RETURN TO CALM

IN ‘THE MOMENT’

‘The Moment’ is something all kids (and adults) experience; it refers to a period of being emotionally overwhelmed, caused by intense feelings of anger, anxiety, or distress.



Understanding Emotional Regulation and Dysregulation in Children

When children face these overwhelming feelings in ‘the moment’, they may experience emotional dysregulation. This means their emotional response doesn’t match the situation. For example, a child might shout angrily because they can’t tie their shoes or hide under a desk and cry because they feel nervous about school. These are examples of dysregulated emotions. In contrast, emotional regulation is when children can manage their feelings and respond appropriately. Co-regulation happens when a supportive adult or peer helps a child calm down and regain control of their emotions. Please note that these strategies are general suggestions, each child is different, and depending on their maturity and cognitive ability the effectiveness of these tips will vary.



Signs of Emotional Dysregulation in Children Include:

Agitation: Clenching teeth, fidgeting excessively, shouting at peers or teachers, pacing, or slamming objects.

Fear or nervousness: Avoiding eye contact, frequent crying, withdrawing from activities, or clinging to adults.

Outbursts: Screaming, throwing tantrums, or physically acting out (hitting, kicking, or throwing objects).

Shutting Down: Refusing to speak, freezing in place, or hiding (under desks, behind furniture, etc.).

Difficulty Communicating: Using only gestures or one-word responses, or struggling to express what they feel.

Below are 11 strategies that teachers can use to help kids return to a calmer head space.

Preventing the Moment

These strategies can be employed anytime and should be done longitudinally to develop healthy habits that can help children build resilience and handle their emotions in a positive manner.

Give Children Autonomy

1

Recognizing that children oftentimes do not have control over most things in their lives is an important perspective to have. Giving kids autonomy in areas of the classroom that they care about can help them feel personally invested and responsible for their education and classroom. Examples of autonomy that teachers can give students include: helping draft and voting on classroom rules, creating a small part of the classroom curriculum, being responsible for weekly clean-up, watering the plants regularly, or feeding the class pet regularly.

Teach Active Listening

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Kids often feel misunderstood by their peers, which can lead to frustration and bullying. Active listening is a communication skill that involves fully focusing on and responding to the speaker, and ultimately builds empathy. This involves not only listening to the speaker's words, but also paying attention to their body language, making eye contact, attending to whether the speaker is expressing big emotions, and slightly encouraging the speaker by nodding. Teach active listening by modeling it yourself, doing fun role-play activities among children, and providing positive reinforcement and constructive feedback.

3 Help children build strong connections and passions

Kids often build their most impactful social connections outside of the daily classroom setting. Advocate for clubs and after school activities that kids want to pursue so that these positive experiences are more accessible to them!

4 Aid in Self Care

While many aspects of promoting self-care such as sleep hygiene, food stability, exposure to violence at home, and stable housing may be outside the control of a child, the importance of teaching about self care builds a sense of self-importance and resilience. Participate in activities such as making a ‘night kit’ which includes a sleep mask and lavender scents or developing a ‘fun exercise’ plan with games such as hop-skotch, tag, or sports.

5 The Value of Modeling Calmness Yourself

Children look to trusted adults for advice and support, both consciously and unconsciously. Modeling calmness yourself as a teacher will go leaps and bounds towards helping children in your classroom emotionally regulate when they are having a moment. For strategies on helping to self regulate as a teacher, read our ‘Teacher’s Regulation Fact Sheet’!



Before the Moment

You can not teach a child how to emotionally regulate themselves when they are at the height of their dysregulation.

Taking the temperature of the room

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Recognize that kids come from diverse environments each and every day before they enter the classroom and thus harbor diverse emotional states from happy to sad to mad. Making space for emotional check-ins can be helpful to understand how kids are feeling that day. Do activities like daily feelings check-in that can give you some insight into the emotional state of the kids in your classroom.

During the Moment

Several strategies can be employed to help a child express their frustration in a less destructive and more positive manner when they are upset.

Allow Kids to Take Breaks

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Emotional regulation takes time, and learning when emotionally dysregulated is near impossible. Recognizing this, give kids timely, easily accessible, and non-destructive strategies to calm down and become self aware when they are in a ‘fight or flight’ mode. For example, kids can push against a wall, crumple colored paper, do belly breathing, or go on a small walk (ideally with a classroom aid or support person).

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Create a Calming Space for Children

A calming space allows children to emotionally regulate and feel safe. Examples are a cozy bean bag corner with sensory toys to self-regulate such as stuffed animals, stress balls, headphones with music, and other calming tools.

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Help co-regulate

Children may not have the tools to calm down by themselves, so you can help them by co-regulating. This can involve things like giving them a warm hug, redirecting their attention to something calming like a serene picture or soothing music, or taking deep breaths. Each child is unique, so it is important to find the co-regulation strategy that is right for them.

After the Moment

Addressing moments of emotional dysregulation are important, but perhaps more important is making sure we do not focus on blame.

Teach children alternative choices they can make when they are upset

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When we are angry or overwhelmed, we are in a fight, flight, or freeze mode and are not actively processing what is being said to us. Thus, it is useful to let kids know of more positive ways to express their frustration after they have regulated, such as tapping on a teacher's shoulder and asking to take a break before the dysregulation escalates. Keep in mind that this is a skill that takes time to develop.



11

Restoration Circles

Punishing a child and making them feel bad for their emotional dysregulation can be counterproductive and reinforce feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Help children develop problem-solving skills as well as self-worth by leading restorative circles. In these circles, have all children involved in the conflict participate and emphasize non-judgemental and non-accusatory language when each child speaks. Try to help children talk directly to each other and encourage them to use I statements such as: “I feel ____ because I think you _____. I wish _____.” As a teacher, practice positive affirmations and help the group come up with a shared solution that they all agree on.

