



The Family Room Presents: Self-Regulation

January 27, 2021

Questions Answered This month:

- How do stress and trauma affect our children?
- What is self-regulation?
- What are some strategies that help with self-regulation?
- Where can I find additional resources for self-regulation strategies?
- How can I continue to support my children and family during these difficult times?

This month's Family Room will focus on introducing families to a number of different strategies to cope with stress and other difficult emotions. We discussed balancing the demands of distance learning in our earlier Family Room presentations as well. You can find those presentations, more Q&As like this, and lists of resources on the Amphi website under the Family Room.

Setting Healthy Boundaries with Children

As parents, we want our children to be happy and comfortable. However, sometimes we must expect children to do things that are uncomfortable or unwanted in order for them to stay healthy, safe and to grow (physically, socially, emotionally, academically, spiritually, etc). This includes, creating the necessary structures and limits which will allow them to do so. Children of all ages benefit from structure, boundaries and limits. While each situation and context may be different and more complicated, it is the same principle as 'forcing' your child to brush their teeth.

We know that parents during COVID-19 are especially concerned for their children's well-being. Parents are worried that their children are depressed and/or anxious. We know that our young people have had to deal with so many losses, disappointments, and changes. It is natural that our instinct would be to not want to do anything to add to their unhappiness, or to ask them to do anything else that would make them unhappy. However, and especially during times of change and crisis, when the usual structures are not in place, children need the adults to create new structure for them.

It is healthy and reasonable to set boundaries and limits. It is important to set clear, consistent expectations. You can involve your child to the degree appropriate for their age in setting these. For example, this may be that at the end of the 'school day' there is a one hour 'no screen' time. With young people spending so much time on screens during distant and remote learning, we do encourage parents to set 'screen-free' time. Consider having your teen 'turn in' their (YOUR) phone for the time you have set for them to be out doors, or doing a non-tech activity and returning it at the end of that time period. Your child may need some help identifying other things to do with their time. Help them create a list or identify other things they can do. Stress makes it difficult to problem solve, so work with them to come up with ideas and solutions. Creating opportunities or building in family activities where you can model, and spend quality time together can also be a good way to accomplish this.

Handling the, "I hate you!" moments

First...breathe. It is never pleasant to hear these kind of statements, though most parents will at some point. Taking a moment to breathe will help you think more clearly, so that you can 'respond' rather than 'react'.

A key to responding is looking past the behavior and words themselves and connect with the emotion that your child is expressing. Is it coming from frustration? Disappointment? Once you can identify the underlying feeling, you can respond to the real issue such as, “I can see that you are very angry right now”. If your child is extremely upset, it may be helpful to give them time to cool down before having that conversation. We all have a common need to feel heard, and for our feelings to be acknowledged and validated. Simply letting your child know “I hear you” is important.

This also does not mean that you are condoning or excusing the behavior or language that your child is using. If they have said or done something that you have made clear is not acceptable, you can still give whatever consequence you feel appropriate. We can be empathetic and validate their *emotions*, while still setting limits on *behavior*. Explicitly discussing that with your child after they have calmed down is also an important part of helping them to self-regulate in the long term. Help them to understand that all feelings are ok, but how they express them and cope with them may not be. “It is absolutely ok to be frustrated because you would like more privileges that I am allowing you, but it is not ok to use that language. What is a better way to express your frustration next time?”

How do we respond to our children when they complain about the long hours in front of the computer?

Validating their concerns and empathizing with your child’s emotions is a good place to start. Let them know that you understand how difficult it is for them and praise them for the efforts they have made. Allow them to express all the many emotions they are experiencing.

Then move towards problem solving. This may look like helping to create a schedule that involves breaks, ideas for non-technology activities they can do during those breaks, or planning other activities that you can do with your child during hours and days that they are not required to be on line.

Managing Discipline and Trauma

Trauma is always complicated and every person’s experience, triggers and reactions will be different. Therefore, the response below is by no means a complete answer, but offers a good place to start.

An important thing in any type of situation is to stay calm. When we are upset or triggered emotionally, this is even more difficult. The self-regulation strategies that we will explore in the Family Room presentation are just as helpful to adults and parents as they are to children, Staying regulated NO MATTER WHAT our children do is important and even more so with children who have experienced trauma. Setting limits, and giving rewards and consequences in a calm and objective manner is important. Having clear expectations and a discipline plan in place can also help parents to respond calmly rather than to react from an emotional place.

Helping Children with Complex Mental and Behavioral Health Needs

Having established routines and expectations that you follow regularly and naturally provides a sense of safety and security during times of crisis or instability. Establishing these as part of your regular schedule when your child is not in crisis is very important.

In fact, brain science informs us that the more we practice routines and procedures when we are in a calm state, the more likely we are to call on those when we are in a crisis. This is because the part of our brain (the hippocampus) that is responsible for storing rote behaviors (what we sometimes call ‘muscle memory’) is an area that continues to function well even when our brain’s crisis center is activated. While it is very difficult for our brains to think critically or problem solve when we are in “flight or fight”, those deeply practiced routines and procedures can still be accessed.

During times when children are struggling most, they will also needed added reassurance from you and others within their support system. They may need encouragement, modeling, and reinforcement to use healthy coping strategies. Any time we positively reinforce young people to use new, healthy coping strategies, we increase the likelihood of them using them again.

Helping Children with Anxiety and Fears

Communicate with your child's teacher(s) and/or school team to let them know about any school related anxiety that your child is experiencing so they can be aware and help problem solve. Zoom related anxiety is an issue for many students during remote learning. Some things that have worked for students with similar anxieties are: receiving permission to keep their camera off with a system for the teacher to be able to know that she is still present and engaged (checking in periodically in the chat or keeping the camera on but pointed away from herself).

Relaxation breathing or a guided relaxation exercise may be a good way to help children (and adults) fall asleep. Different relaxation activities, links and resources will be introduced at the Family Room presentation. There are also many different sleep apps that you can download with different types of relaxation exercises designed to help you fall asleep.

Positive affirmations and positive self-talk are also great strategies for children and adults to practice. Many times anxiety and fear are based on irrational thoughts or fears ("everyone is going to laugh at me"). The longer these thoughts are repeated, the 'deeper' that thought path becomes in our brains. By practicing affirmations, or repeating positive self-talk phrases that counter these negative thoughts, new pathways are created.

Self- Regulation

We will touch on how each of these (age, disability, and trauma) affect the ability to self-regulate during the Family Room presentation. Although young people (and adults) may have difficulty with self-regulation for a number of different reasons, an important thing to remember is that like anything, the more exposure and practice, the easier it becomes. The basic strategies are the same across age groups, disability and diagnosis, although the activities that we use to help teach them may look different. We will share a number of different activities and resources, including free online resources to help children of all ages and abilities.

Modeling Hard Emotions

The Family Room received the following question, **"Is it best for our children to see us handle overwhelming/tough emotions and feelings in front of them or should we excuse ourselves and deal with that privately?"**

Our response is: YES. There is value in allowing your children to see you handle tough feelings in healthy ways. This provides important modeling for them and an opportunity to reinforce that everyone experiences difficult and overwhelming emotions at times. It is helpful to talk about it explicitly either during or afterward.

However, if you yourself are struggling to cope with tough emotions in healthy ways, than this is something that you do want to deal with more privately. Children will naturally become frightened if they get a sense that their parents are "not ok" for any length of time. It is also important to distinguish between sharing your coping skills and process versus sharing adult information or situations that would not be appropriate or healthy for children to be aware of.

Engaging Teens in self-Regulation

Even if children or teens seem turned-off by self-regulation strategies like yoga or meditation, keep encouraging and modeling these strategies for them. By repeated exposure, you are planting a seed and may be surprised that they are trying them without you realizing or without having to admit this to their parents. Try introducing them to a number of different strategies. Part of learning to self-regulate is finding what works for us each as individuals.

Like any 'new' behavior, it can also be helpful to positively reinforce the behavior. We know that to change behaviors, we need an 8:1 ratio of positive reinforcement. This means we need to recognize and praise or reward the 'new' behavior 8x for every one time we recognize the 'old' behavior in order to create sustainable change. That is a lot! Young people (and adults) often do not change behavior unless there is an external force pushing them to do so, at least in the beginning. So keep it up!