



Tips for Tots



Tip #1: Help Young Children Regulate their Emotions

Strategies

Did you know?

Infant/Toddler:

At birth, infants look to their caregivers to soothe strong emotions and attend to their needs. As babies grow, they begin to learn the complex process of regulating their own emotions. A sensitive caregiver sees this as a dance between providing soothing and allowing a child to tolerate some distress in order to learn to self-soothe. Babies and toddlers take their cues from adults. A caregiver who is calm, encouraging, acknowledges emotions and shows empathy sends the message that emotions are important but need not be overwhelming.

Preschool:

A large poll of Kindergarten teachers found that 'self-regulation' is one of the most important skills for kindergarten readiness. Self-regulation contributes to the ability to pay attention, plan and follow through and to conceptualize. Preschoolers often have strong emotional reactions throughout their day. Helping children learn to identify emotions & teaching strategies for coping with strong feelings helps to build this critical skill.

Infant/Toddler:

- In order to learn to self-soothe, all children need to feel safe and strongly connected to a caregiver.
- Young children can be encouraged to understand their feelings (the first step to managing them). When upset, name and interpret for them. Eg: using an empathic tone, "I understand. You are very upset. You don't want to stop playing and change your diaper."
- Model taking a big breath and relaxing yourself. Often, young children will follow your lead.
- Avoid 'shushing' babies or toddlers. Crying and tantrums are an expression of emotions that are very real to them and are outlets that calm the brain. Instead, acknowledge their 'upset' and then try redirecting them to another activity.
- Assess how much external soothing a child needs and start there. Eg: a child who is new to childcare will need plenty of extra soothing from providers. As they feel more connected and safe, they can be encouraged to tolerate slightly more frustration.
- Give choices. A toddler who is encouraged to make choices takes more responsibility for the outcome and feels more able to cope.

Preschool:

- Post pictures of 'feelings faces' and teach children the names of different emotions like happy, sad, frustrated, and angry.
- Use circle time for a 'feelings check in' and ask what causes different feelings.
- Create fun activities to teach breathing and calming down. Encourage children to use these when they begin to get upset.
- Become more aware of and find ways to regulate your own emotions. This is a powerful tool in teaching self-regulation.
- Acknowledge children's feelings before addressing their behavior. When children feel understood, they feel safe and able to learn a different way of reacting next time.
- Plan a schedule that allows for child choice time. Imaginative and creative play such as blocks, dramatic play and open ended art are the most effective in helping children practice self-regulation.
- Create a 'safe place' using a tent or large box and teach children to use it one at a time. Allow children to use this space whenever they need it. Removing themselves for a short time can be like a 'reset button' for children and is a powerful skill to learn.

Resources:

Tools of the Mind: <http://www.mscd.edu/extendedcampus/toolsofthemind/>
Center for Social and Emotional Foundations of Learning: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

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