

# Teaching young children to manage their emotions

*Kaylene Henderson*



Dr Kaylene Henderson is an Australian Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, author, mother of three and a warm and engaging speaker. She is also a member of the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health and is a passionate advocate for early intervention practices. To support the critical role played by early childhood professionals, Dr Henderson has developed a scientifically informed, yet practical, online course series entitled *Raising Good Kids: A professional's guide to managing behaviour and emotions in 0-5-year-olds* (launched late April). She has also developed a corresponding course series for parents in the hope that, by sharing the same, research-based education with parents, educators and caregivers, these groups can work together to provide maximum benefit for the children for whom we all care.

Children learn best when they are feeling safe and calm. Yet children are not born with the innate ability to calm themselves down from strong feeling states. It takes years to develop these skills along with the development of essential brain pathways. Within education and care settings, young children will need your help to calm down quite often. And since it makes sense to ensure that your students are in the best state for learning, it's important that you know how to help them with this.

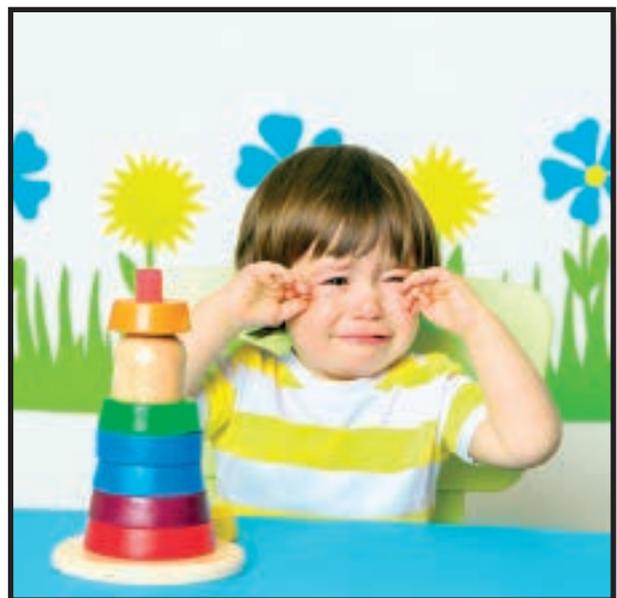
Let's first look at how children develop the ability to calm down from strong feeling states (clinically known as 'emotional regulation'). As with many areas of development, there are specific stages that children go through as they learn these important skills.

### **Stages of development of emotional regulation**

1. Initially, the adult needs to calm the infant's distress for them by doing things like holding the infant close, patting or rocking them.
2. Later, feelings can be managed with the help of the adult. This is called 'co-regulation of emotions'.
3. Finally, the child can manage their feelings on their own – 'self-regulation of emotions'.



*When children are very young or when they have had limited practice at calming down, they will need your help quite often since even mild emotional upsets can be overwhelming.*



*Emotional upsets can be overwhelming.*

With repeated practice, children will improve at regulating their emotions as they develop through these stages. They might still require your help when their feelings are more intense or at times when they're less able to cope due to tiredness, hunger or sickness. But the key, as with any new skill-set, is repeated, consistent practice.

In reality, even as adults we might move between stages two and three depending on how well we're coping at the time, how much sleep we have had and how stressful the trigger is. This means that most of the time we are able to calm ourselves down but at other times we still need close adults to help comfort and contain our distress. Similarly, some of the children in your care may be fairly skilled at calming themselves down, but it's important to know that there will still be times when even these children will need your help.

### **So what is the most effective way to help children calm down?**

To help us understand the most effective approach, let's first consider what approaches help us to calm down when we, as adults, are feeling overwhelmed by our feelings.

Think of a time when you have been upset ...

Has it helped when someone has attempted to distract you?

Tried to reason you out of your feeling state?

Or worse, treated you punitively?

Many of us would identify that simply having someone pay attention to us and genuinely try to understand our experience is what feels most helpful when we're feeling distressed.

Indeed, **connection** and **empathy** are what we need. These are what our brains need to regulate our emotions. Distraction, logic and punishment are not. In fact, as I'm sure you can imagine, when we use distraction, logic or punishment when children are upset, they take much longer to calm down. Research shows that when we try to distract children or talk them out of their feelings, then they stay feeling upset for longer.

So what is **connection** and how do we do it? Connection is something that I'm sure you do all the time. It requires squatting or kneeling down to a child's level, turning your body towards theirs and paying attention – really paying attention to what's happening for them.

*By making that important connection with a child, you convey to him or her that whatever is happening at that moment, you can work it out together.*

And **empathy**? Empathy is the ability to understand the situation from the child's perspective, even when it seems like she is over-reacting to a trivial issue. This includes an understanding of what the child is feeling and conveying this understanding back to the child, through our words, facial expression and body language.

*Each time you help children to calm themselves down using connection and empathy, you bring them one step closer to being able to better manage their feelings themselves.*

By effectively managing children's feelings, you will also be able to prevent more disruptive 'meltdowns' and behaviours. Importantly, you also strengthen your relationships with the children in your care while teaching them that they can always seek the help of an adult, no matter how they're feeling.

But the benefits of supporting and teaching emotional regulation don't stop there.

*Not only are calm children better learners but the ability to manage feelings is an important predictor of school readiness.*

Never underestimate the importance of your role in influencing children's outcomes, not only at school, but all throughout their teenage and adult lives.