

Similarly, if getting out the door in the morning is causing breakdowns, target one step at a time. For example, first getting dressed by 6:15. Once they have mastered that, set a target time for breakfast, and add that. Breaking the chain into small steps allows them to build self-regulation skills in manageable portions.

**Help children become self-reflective** – Bezsytko stresses that when parents or teachers approach impulsive, inappropriate behaviour calmly and give them time, children can learn to choose better ways to respond to that situation. The feedback children need is non-judgemental and non-emotional – what went wrong, why and how can they fix it next time. “When children are part of an environment that is reflective and analytical as opposed to emotional and fast-paced,” Bezsytko explains, “they can learn to make better choices.” Slowing down allows children to become more thoughtful, reflective and self-aware. “We need to slow down and model/coach self-reflection, self-awareness and self-regulation for our children.” (<https://childmind.org/article/can-help-kids-self-regulation/>)



Keep safe and should you require counselling, you are welcome to contact Social Work Services at 079 880 5966 or 012 393 5472 or liaise with any of the SAPS's Family and Relationship Desk members:

- Lt Col C Kleingeld at 012 393 5192 and kleingeldc@saps.gov.za
- Capt V Nkosi at 012 393 5244 and NkosiViolet@saps.gov.za
- Capt LK Mahlase at 012 393 5187 and MahlaseL2@saps.gov.za.

**ON A JOURNEY TO A SAFER  
SOUTH AFRICA**

HOW TO HELP YOUR SCHOOL-AGED  
CHILDREN  
**CONTROL THEIR  
EMOTIONS**  
RATHER THAN THROWING TANTRUMS



If you are a parent, chances are you have witnessed a tantrum or two. We expect them from two-year-olds, but if your child reaches school age and outbursts are still frequent, it may be a sign that he/she has difficulty with being able to control their emotions, and consequently continue to struggle with impulsive and inappropriate behaviour.

**What is self-regulation?** Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behaviour in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, to calm yourself down when you become upset, to adjust to a change and expectations, as well as to deal with frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables children, as they mature, to direct their own behaviour toward a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

**What does emotional dysregulation look like?** Problems with self-regulation manifest in different ways depending on the child, says Matthew Rouse, a clinical psychologist with a PhD. "Some children have a severe, instantaneous reaction with no build-up," he says. "They cannot inhibit that immediate behaviour response". For other children, distress seems to build up and they can only take it for so long, before it leads to some sort of behavioural outburst. "You can see them going down the wrong path, but you do not know how to stop it." The key for both kinds of children is for them to learn to handle those strong reactions and find ways to express their emotions that are more effective and less disruptive than having an outburst.



**Why do some children struggle with self-regulation?** Dr Rouse sees emotional control issues as a combination of temperament and learned behaviour. "A child's personal capacity for self-regulation, is temperament and personality-based," he explains. Some babies have trouble self-soothing and become very distressed when the parent tries to bath them or clothe them. Those children may be more likely to experience trouble with emotional self-regulation when they become older.

However, the environment plays a role as well. When parents give in to tantrums or work overtime to soothe their children when they become upset and act out, children have a hard time developing self-discipline. "In those situations, the child is basically looking to the parents to be external self-regulators," Dr Rouse says. "If that is a pattern and happens again and again, and a child is able to 'outsource' self-regulation, then that is something that might develop as a habit."

Children with ADHD or anxiety, may find it particularly challenging to manage their emotions and need more help to develop emotional regulation skills.

**How do we teach self-regulation skills?** Scott Bezsylo, the executive director of the Winston Preparatory schools for children with learning difficulties, says that acting out is essentially an ineffective response to a stimulus. The parent or teacher needs to help the child slow down and more carefully choose an effective response instead of being impulsive. "We approach self-regulation skills in the same way we approach other skills, academic or social – isolate that skill and provide practise," Bezsylo explains. "If you think of it as a skill to be taught rather than just bad behaviour, it changes the tone and content of the feedback you give children."

The key to learning self-regulation skills, says Dr Rouse, is not to avoid situations that are difficult for children to deal with, but to coach your children through them and provide a supportive framework that clinicians call 'scaffolding' the behaviour you want to encourage – until they can handle these challenges on their own.

Imagine a situation that can produce strong negative emotions, like a frustrating math homework assignment. If a parent hovers too much, they risk taking over the regulation role. "Instead of the child recognising that the work is frustrating and figuring out how to handle it," Dr Rouse explains, "what they feel is that the parent is frustrating them by making them do it."

'Scaffolding' in this situation might be helping the child with one problem, and then expecting them to try the rest. They might use a timer to give themselves periodic breaks. The parent would check in on them at intervals and offer praise for their efforts. If a child is prone to acting out when they are asked to stop playing a video game, 'scaffolding' might be practising transitioning away from the game. "You need to practise with a game that is NOT overly important to them," Dr Rouse explains. "Have them practise playing for two or three minutes and then handing you the game. They get points for something they want every time they do it."

**Practise runs** – Dry runs are another way to scaffold self-regulation. For instance, if you have had trouble with a child reacting impulsively or throwing a tantrum in a shop, make a short visit when you do not need to do serious shopping. Have them practise walking with you, keeping their hands to themselves. They get points for some goal every time they are successful.

Dr Rouse says that often parents become discouraged when things do not go well the first time they try building their child's skills, but consistency and starting at a level that is appropriate for your child, are key. Rather than giving up, try paring down the activity so that it becomes more do-able, and slowly give your child more and more independence to deal with it. For instance, if brushing their teeth is a problem for your child, you might start by focusing just on putting toothpaste on the brush and respond with positive feedback and a reward when they do it. Once they have practised that a few times, add the next step in the chain.

