

The Sallygate Parent Guide Series

Understanding Emotional Regulation

Helping your child recognise, understand and manage their emotions

Introduction

"My child goes from calm to angry in seconds."

"The smallest thing can cause a huge reaction."

"Nothing seems to calm them down."

"It feels like they're either completely fine or completely overwhelmed."

If you've ever thought this, you're not alone.

Emotional regulation is one of the most common challenges experienced by children with SEMH, autism, ADHD, trauma and anxiety.

It can also be one of the most misunderstood.

Children don't wake up wanting to lose control.

When emotions become overwhelming, behaviour is often the result—not the cause.

Understanding emotional regulation is one of the most powerful ways we can support children.

What is Emotional Regulation?

Emotional regulation is our ability to:

- recognise how we're feeling
- understand why we feel that way
- respond in a way that keeps ourselves and others safe

For adults, this often happens automatically.

For children, especially those with SEND, it is still developing.

Regulation isn't something children either have or don't have.

It's a skill that develops over time through relationships, experience and practice.

Why do some children struggle to regulate?

Emotional regulation is influenced by many things.

Children may struggle because of:

- autism
- ADHD
- anxiety
- trauma
- sensory overload
- communication differences
- executive functioning
- poor sleep
- hunger
- uncertainty

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- feeling unsafe

Sometimes it isn't the event itself that causes the reaction.
It's everything that happened before it.

The Bucket Analogy

Imagine every child carries an invisible bucket.

Throughout the day things are added to it.

Noise.

Unexpected changes.

Friendship worries.

Demands.

Bright lights.

Busy classrooms.

Feeling misunderstood.

Eventually...

The bucket overflows.

The behaviour we see is often simply the overflow.

The goal isn't to stop the overflow.

It's to help empty the bucket before it becomes too full.

Co-Regulation Comes Before Self-Regulation

One of the biggest myths in education is that children should simply learn to calm themselves.

The reality is different.

Children learn to regulate **with adults** before they can regulate **by themselves**.

When adults remain calm, predictable and emotionally available, children's nervous systems begin to settle too.

This is known as **co-regulation**.

It's one of the most powerful strategies we have.

Emotional Regulation and Autism

Many autistic children experience emotions intensely.

Regulation may become difficult because of:

- sensory overload
- uncertainty
- masking throughout the day
- communication differences
- changes to routine

Helpful strategies include:

- ✓ visual supports
- ✓ reducing sensory input
- ✓ giving processing time
- ✓ offering predictable routines
- ✓ respecting recovery time after school

Emotional Regulation and ADHD

Children with ADHD often experience emotions quickly and intensely.

This isn't because they are "overreacting."

Research suggests ADHD affects the brain systems involved in impulse control and emotional regulation.

Helpful approaches include:

- movement
- clear routines
- reducing waiting time
- breaking tasks into smaller steps
- recognising emotional escalation early

Emotional Regulation and PDA

For children with PDA profiles, heightened anxiety can make everyday demands feel overwhelming.

When anxiety increases, regulation becomes more difficult.

Support often means:

- reducing unnecessary demands
- working collaboratively
- offering choices
- protecting relationships
- avoiding power struggles

Emotional Regulation and Trauma

Children who have experienced trauma often have nervous systems that remain highly alert.

Their brains are constantly asking:

Am I safe?

When children don't feel safe, thinking becomes harder.

Learning becomes harder.

Regulation becomes harder.

Safety always comes before learning.

What Does Dysregulation Look Like?

Every child is different.

Some children become loud.

Others become quiet.

You may notice:

- shouting
- crying
- running away
- hiding
- refusing
- laughing
- becoming very still
- arguing

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- hitting
- withdrawing

All of these may be ways of communicating,
"I'm overwhelmed."

What Helps?

Before emotions become overwhelming

- ✓ predictable routines
- ✓ enough sleep
- ✓ movement
- ✓ regular food and drink
- ✓ reducing sensory overload
- ✓ connection
- ✓ laughter

During dysregulation

Children need adults who are:

Calm.

Predictable.

Patient.

Safe.

Less talking.

More listening.

More presence.

Less pressure.

Avoid

- ✗ lengthy explanations
- ✗ lectures
- ✗ asking lots of questions
- ✗ consequences while dysregulated

The thinking brain is temporarily offline.

Connection comes first.

Reflection comes later.

After Regulation

Once calm has returned

Help children reflect.

Ask:

"What happened?"

"What did your body feel like?"

"What helped?"

"What might help next time?"

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This is where emotional regulation is taught.
Not during the crisis.

Regulation Toolkit

Encourage children to discover what works for them.

Ideas include:

-  Forest walk
-  Walking
-  Drawing
-  Music
-  Reading
-  Puzzles
-  Movement
-  Comfort objects
-  Bubble breathing
-  Stretching
-  Drinking water
-  Quiet spaces

Common Myths

Myth

"They're just seeking attention."

"They should know better."

"Calm down!" works.

Consequences teach regulation.

Reality

Children are often seeking connection, safety or understanding.

Knowing what to do and being able to do it when overwhelmed are different things.

Children need co-regulation before self-regulation.

Emotional regulation develops through relationships, modelling and practice.

How We Support Emotional Regulation at Sallygate

At Sallygate, emotional regulation isn't taught in a single lesson.

It's woven through every part of the school day.

Children experience:

- trusted relationships
- predictable routines
- emotional coaching
- movement breaks
- outdoor learning
- sensory support
- restorative conversations
- opportunities to practise regulation every day

Our aim isn't simply to reduce behaviour.

It's to help children understand themselves.

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Because children who understand their emotions are better equipped to manage them.

When Should I Seek Additional Help?

Speak to your GP, school or healthcare professional if your child:

- regularly becomes overwhelmed
- is unable to recover after becoming distressed
- experiences significant anxiety
- struggles to access everyday life because of emotional regulation difficulties

Early support makes a real difference.

Final Reflection

One of the biggest shifts in my own thinking has been recognising that emotional regulation isn't about teaching children to stay calm.

It's about helping them feel safe enough to become calm.

That changes everything.

Instead of asking,

"How do I stop this behaviour?"

we begin asking,

"What is my child experiencing right now, and what do they need from me?"

When we make that shift, we stop seeing emotional regulation as something we do **to** children and start recognising it as something we build **with** them.

That's the approach we take every day at Sallygate.

Because understanding always comes before change.

This is Sallygate.