

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION

## GOAL

To help you support your child in learning how to manage emotions, handle frustration, and build self-regulation skills.

## BACKGROUND

Every child experiences big emotions, but some struggle more than others to manage them. If your child has frequent meltdowns, difficulty calming down, or trouble handling frustration, you're not alone.

Children may struggle with emotional regulation because:

- Their brain is still developing – Skills like impulse control and flexibility take time.
- They lack coping strategies – Without tools to manage emotions, they may cry, hit, or shut down.
- They have trouble communicating – When they can't express their needs, frustration builds.
- They are sensitive to their environment – Loud noises, bright lights, or sudden changes can feel overwhelming.

Emotional regulation can be taught. With patience, consistency, and the right strategies, you can help your child develop the skills to manage emotions in a healthy way.

## WHY TEACH EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

Emotional regulation is an essential life skill. When your child learns how to manage emotions, they can:

- Handle frustration more easily
- Express their needs in a positive way
- Feel more confident and independent
- Build stronger relationships

When children can regulate emotions, they have more positive interactions with family, teachers, and peers, and experience more independence.

Your support is the key to helping your child succeed. The following strategies will guide you in teaching emotional regulation in ways that are simple, practical, and backed by research.

# CO-REGULATION

Before a child can regulate emotions on their own, they need to experience co-regulation—which means feeling safe, supported, and understood when big emotions happen.

## WHAT IS CO-REGULATION?

Co-regulation is the process of helping your child manage their emotions by providing calm, supportive guidance. Young children, and even older children who struggle with self-regulation, cannot calm down on their own—they need a trusted adult to help them navigate their emotions.

Think of it this way: when a baby is crying, we don't expect them to soothe themselves immediately. Instead, we rock them, hum, and offer comfort until they settle. As children grow, they still need that external regulation before they can learn internal regulation. If a child is overwhelmed, their brain is in a fight-or-flight mode, and they are not ready to listen, process, or use coping strategies. Before they can calm down, they need to feel safe.

### Do this:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ <b>Stay close and present</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Let your child know you are there without forcing interaction.</li></ul></li><li>✓ <b>Use a calm, steady voice</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Your child will mirror your tone and body language.</li></ul></li><li>✓ <b>Offer simple, reassuring words</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "I see you're upset. I'm here."</li></ul></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ <b>Match their energy, then guide them down</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Start with a firm but calm presence, then slow your breathing, soften your voice, and bring them with you.</li></ul></li><li>✓ <b>Provide sensory support</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some children respond best to movement, gentle touch, or rhythmic rocking.</li></ul></li></ul> |
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## WHAT TYPE OF INTERACTIONS DOES YOUR CHILD RESPOND BEST TO?

# TEACHING COPING STRATEGIES

Once your child is calm, they need tools to manage emotions next time. But not every strategy works for every child.

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## BREATHING EXERCISES

Teach deep breathing by pretending to blow up a balloon slowly, then letting the air out gently. This helps slow the body's response to stress and signals the brain to calm down. Practice when your child is calm so they can use it in difficult moments.

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## MOVEMENT-BASED STRATEGIES

Some children need to move their bodies to regulate emotions. Activities like jumping, wall push-ups, stretching, or swinging provide sensory input that helps with calming and focus. Movement can also serve as a replacement behavior for aggression or restlessness.

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## SENSORY SUPPORTS

Many children find comfort in certain textures or weights. Offer a weighted blanket, a fidget toy, or a calming texture like playdough. Experiment with different sensory inputs to find what works best for your child.

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## PREDICTABILITY TOOLS

Sudden changes can trigger emotional dysregulation. Use visual schedules, "First-Then" boards, or timers to prepare your child for transitions and reduce anxiety. Knowing what to expect can make difficult moments easier to manage.

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## USE A QUIET SPACE

Overstimulation can lead to emotional overwhelm. Create a calm area where your child can go to regroup. This space should feel safe and not be used as punishment but rather as a place where they can regain control.

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## ENCOURAGE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Teach your child how to ask for help using words, signs, or visuals. For nonverbal children, having an easy-to-use communication method can prevent frustration. Model problem-solving by talking through your own challenges in front of them.

# BUILDING TOLERANCE FOR FRUSTRATION

Frustration tolerance is something that can be taught gradually, over time. Children need practice handling small challenges so they can learn to manage bigger frustrations later.

## START SMALL

If your child struggles with waiting, have them wait just 5 seconds before getting what they want, then gradually increase the time. Short, manageable challenges help build confidence by allowing your child to experience success. The goal is to make waiting feel possible rather than overwhelming, so they build the patience needed for longer delays. Providing a countdown or using a visual timer can help them track how long they need to wait.

## BREAK TASKS INTO SMALLER STEPS

Large tasks can feel overwhelming, leading to frustration or avoidance. Breaking them down into smaller, clear steps can help your child feel more capable and motivated to keep going. Use visuals, checklists, or simple instructions to make tasks feel more manageable. Gradually increase the complexity as your child gains confidence in their ability to complete tasks independently.

## USE VISUALS AND TIMERS

Providing a visual timer can make waiting easier by giving your child a way to track time. Using a "choice board" can give children control over how they respond to frustration, helping them feel empowered rather than overwhelmed. Some children benefit from a visual "calm down" checklist that walks them through steps they can take when they start to feel upset. Over time, these tools help children become more independent in managing their emotions.

## ENCOURAGE PERSISTENCE

If they give up easily, prompt them to try again before stepping in to help. Use phrases like, "Let's try one more time!" to support problem-solving. Breaking the task into smaller steps or providing reinforcement for effort (rather than just success) can motivate them to keep trying. Encouraging a growth mindset—where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities—can help children become more resilient in the face of challenges.

## NORMALIZE MISTAKES

Help your child see mistakes as part of learning, not failure. When they struggle, model self-talk like, "That didn't work, but I can try a different way!" Acknowledging your own mistakes in front of your child and demonstrating how to problem-solve can reinforce that mistakes are not something to fear. Encourage your child to reflect on what they learned rather than focusing on getting everything right.

# REINFORCING SELF-REGULATION BEHAVIORS

Helping your child build self-regulation skills requires consistent reinforcement so they can learn to use these strategies on their own. Reinforcement strengthens behaviors, making it more likely that your child will choose healthy coping skills in the future.



## **NOTICE THE EFFORT, NOT JUST THE OUTCOME**

Praise your child for trying to regulate their emotions, even if they aren't successful every time. Saying, "I love how you took a deep breath before asking for help!" helps them recognize their progress and feel motivated to keep trying.



## **ENCOURAGE FLEXIBLE THINKING**

When your child successfully adapts to a change, acknowledge it. "You wanted the blue cup, but you used the green one instead—that was a great choice!" This helps children learn that flexibility is a skill that makes life easier.



## **REINFORCE PROBLEM-SOLVING**

If your child finds a way to manage frustration without an outburst, let them know you noticed. "You figured out another way to do it! I love how you didn't give up." Encouraging problem-solving builds confidence and teaches them that challenges can be worked through.

# REINFORCING SELF-REGULATION BEHAVIORS



## USE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT STRATEGIES

Small rewards, praise, or a preferred activity can be great motivators for children learning self-regulation. Reinforcement doesn't always have to be tangible—a high-five, a hug, or words of encouragement can be just as effective.



## CREATE SELF-MONITORING OPPORTUNITIES

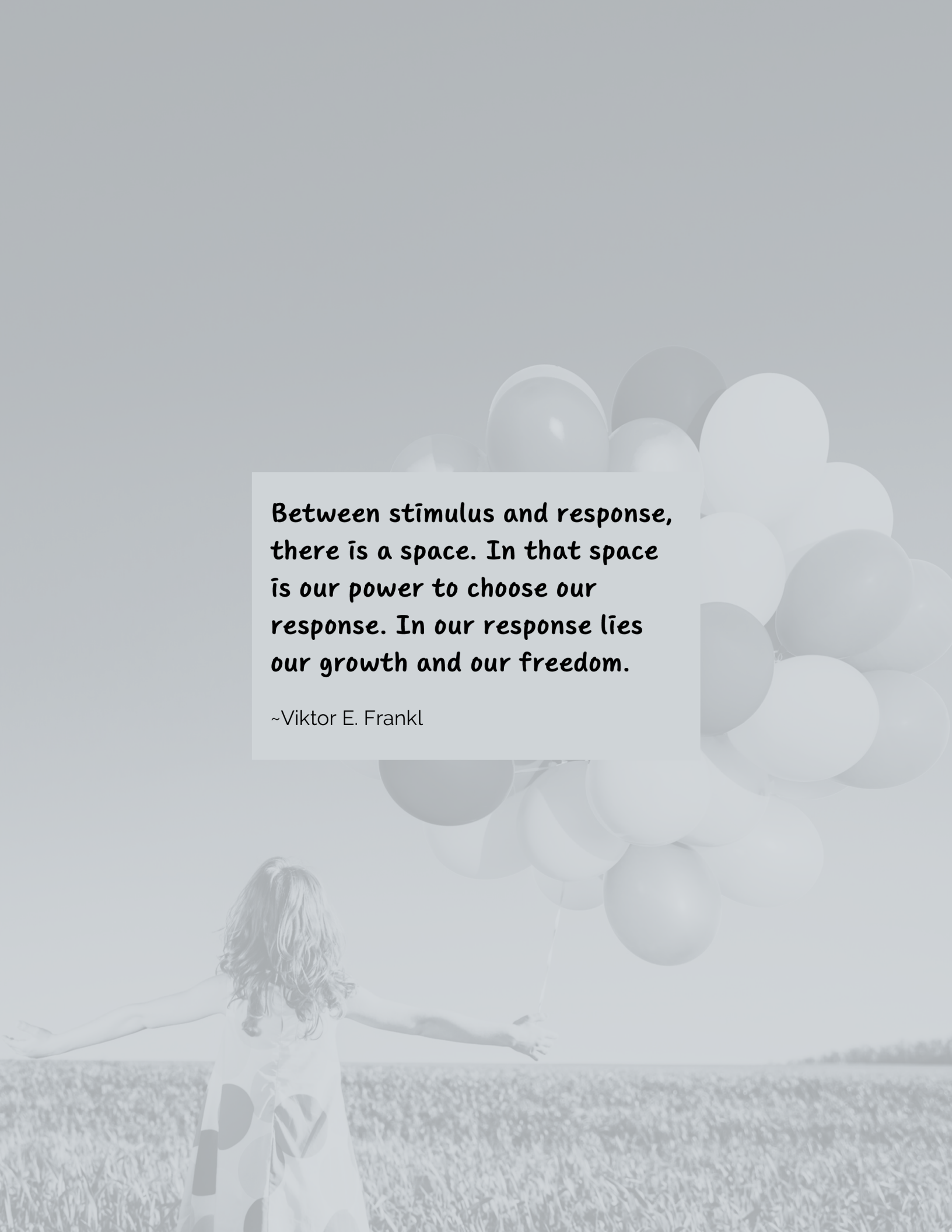
As your child develops regulation skills, encourage them to recognize their own progress. "How did you feel when you took a deep breath before answering?" This reflection helps them become more aware of what strategies work best for them.



## MODEL SELF-REGULATION YOURSELF

Children learn best by watching the adults around them. If you're feeling frustrated, model self-regulation strategies: "I'm feeling overwhelmed, so I'm going to take a deep breath before I respond." When children see self-regulation in action, they are more likely to use those skills themselves.

The more you reinforce positive self-regulation behaviors, the more your child will use them. Over time, these skills will become a natural part of how they manage emotions, building confidence, independence, and resilience.

A grayscale photograph of a woman with long, wavy hair, seen from behind, standing in a field of tall grass. She is wearing a light-colored dress with large dark polka dots. She holds a large cluster of balloons in her right hand, with her left arm extended outwards. The balloons are in various shades of gray and white. The background is a soft-focus landscape under a pale sky.

**Between stimulus and response,  
there is a space. In that space  
is our power to choose our  
response. In our response lies  
our growth and our freedom.**

~Viktor E. Frankl