



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

JULY 2025
BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Behavioral and emotional regulation, from birth to five, involves a child's ability to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. This development occurs through co-regulation with caregivers, where children learn to recognize and understand emotions, and gradually develop independent self-regulation skills.

Factors Influencing Healthy Emotional Development

Caregiver Responsiveness:

Responsive and supportive caregivers who are attuned to their child's needs are crucial for promoting healthy emotional and behavioral regulation.

Positive Environment:

A predictable and safe environment can help children feel secure and reduce stress.

Social Interactions:

Opportunities for social interaction with peers and adults help children learn social skills and emotional regulation.



Biggest Factor that Disrupts Healthy Emotional Development

Traumatic events and dysregulation go hand-in-hand and have a profound sensory impact on young children. Lacking an accurate understanding of the relationship between cause and effect, young children believe that their thoughts, wishes, and fears have the power to become real and can make things happen.

Young children who experience trauma are at particular risk because their rapidly developing brains are very vulnerable. Exposure to trauma can disrupt the nervous system and early childhood trauma has been associated with reduced size of the brain cortex impacting memory, attention, perceptual awareness, thinking, language, and consciousness.

Trauma disrupts regulation, causing hypervigilance or dissociation, delayed emotional responses, difficulty developing trust and attachment, lack of impulse control, or regression in developmental milestones.



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Tips for Professionals as They Navigate Challenging Dysregulation Behaviors

- **Be patient - regulation takes time to develop.**
 - Remember that young children's brains are still developing, especially in areas that support impulse control and emotional regulation. Repeated, calm, and consistent responses help build neural pathways that support future self-regulation skills.
- **Normalize behaviors within the context of trauma.**
 - Help those around the child understand that behaviors like tantrums, aggression, or withdrawal may be trauma responses, not signs of "bad" behavior. Framing the behavior this way reduces blame and increases empathy and understanding.
- **Support caregivers in being the "external regulators"; the person who provides strategies (such as mindfulness) to help improve regulation and resilience.**
 - Model and teach caregivers how to remain calm and present during a child's dysregulation, offering soothing strategies such as deep breathing, rhythmic movement, or sensory support. Their quiet presence can co-regulate the child's overwhelmed nervous system.
- **Document patterns, not just incidents.**
 - Instead of focusing on isolated outbursts, track when and where dysregulation occurs, what happened before it, and how the child returned to a calm state. This helps identify triggers and practical strategies, supporting more informed planning with families and teams.

By understanding the stages of development and the factors that influence them, parents, caregivers, educators, and child welfare professionals can support children in developing strong emotional and behavioral regulation skills. It's critical to have consistency in working with a child displaying dysregulation. An effective team approach is essential for that child's well-being and future success.



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Reflection on Content

How does a young child (ages 0-5) displaying emotional or behavioral dysregulation affect your own emotional state when working with families? What is your support plan in these situations? If you do not yet have a plan, consider what support strategies you could put in place.

Action Item

Think about a young child with behavioral challenges. Are you confident in distinguishing between dysregulation behavior and intentional defiance?