

Emotion Identification & Regulation

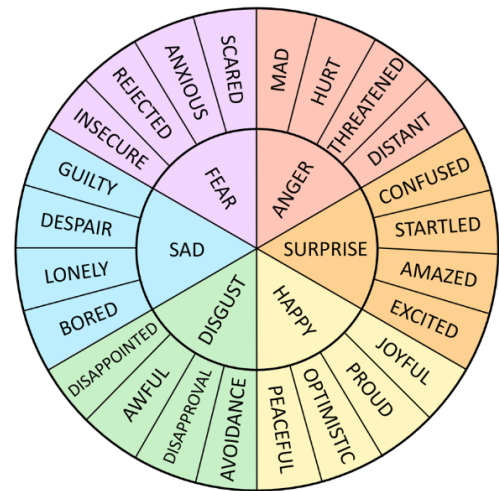
Child & Adolescent Resource

Introduction

As children, we experience many of the same emotions adults do, like nervousness, sadness, and anger. However, we don't always have the words to describe the emotions we're feeling. Because of this, big emotions may be acted out in inappropriate or physical ways, like yelling, hitting, or having a meltdown. Since life is full of ups-and-downs, it's important to know how to *identify* your feelings and find *healthy* ways to express them (Vanderbilt University).

Identifying Emotions:

Before we can begin to express our feelings, we need to be able to identify and understand them. When we're little, we can differentiate between core emotions like anger, fear, sadness, and happiness (The Movement for Children's Mental Health, 2021). Specifically, we learn to read faces, tone of voice, and body language. As we get older, we can identify (and feel) more complex emotions. Secondary emotions, such as guilt or jealousy, also come into play at this age (The Gottman Institute, 2023).



Primary Emotions:

The first emotions one experiences and are a reaction to an event or stimulus. These are emotions that are “built-in,” or that we are born with: anger, sadness, fear, joy, interest, surprise, shame, and disgust.

The Gottman Institute (2023)
Simply Psychology (2023)

Secondary Emotions:

These emotions are linked to primary emotions. They reflect “our emotional reaction to having certain feelings.”

These emotions are habitual and learned from experiences. For example, if a child gets punished for crying, she may feel anxious (secondary emotion) the next time she feels sad (primary emotion).

Secondary emotions serve as a defense mechanism, “covering up” primary emotions that make one feel more vulnerable or sensitive.

The Gottman Institute (2023)
Simply Psychology (2023)

Emotion Identification Tools:

When it comes to self-regulation, identifying emotions is the first step! The Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation offers the following ideas:

- Practice recognizing and labeling your own emotions as you go about your day. For instance, saying, “I can’t get this math question right... I feel so frustrated!”
- Start using a “mood meter” or “emotion zone” chart to help identify what you’re feeling during emotional moments.
- At the end of the day, talk to a family member or friend about an emotion you felt during the day. For example, “I felt _____ when _____ happened.” Talking things out helps us identify our emotions and *why* we might be feeling that way.



Activities with Friends and Family:

- While watching a movie or television show, take turns choosing a character and talking about how they might be feeling. Pay attention to their body language, the things they say, and facial expressions. Based on these things, how might the character be feeling?
- Get creative! Write songs, stories, or draw pictures that reflect different emotions. These could be based on your own feelings, a friend's, or a character that you create.
- Play “feelings charades,” by writing down different emotions on a piece of paper and putting them into a jar. Take turns pulling out an emotion and acting it out, while everyone else tries to identify what you are feeling (The Movement for Children’s Mental Health, 2023).

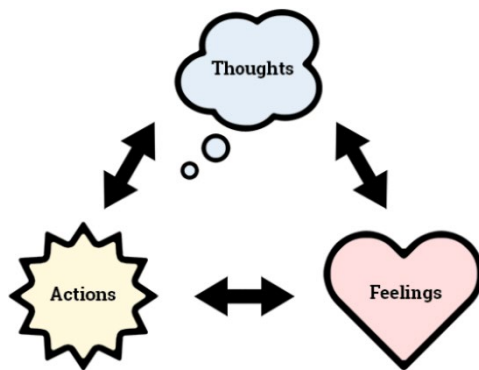
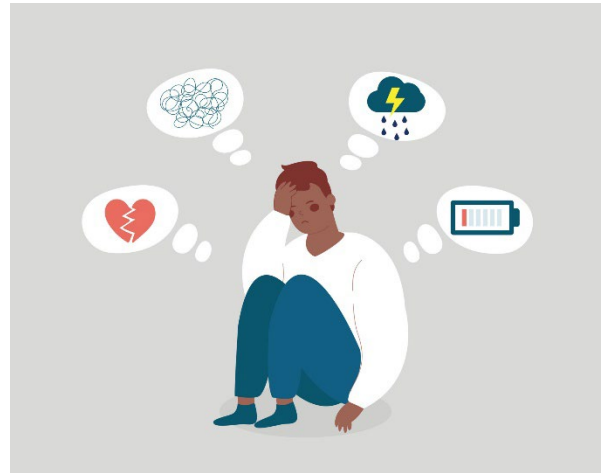
Identifying Primary vs. Secondary Emotions:

- Ask yourself, “Is this emotion a direct reaction?” If so, it’s likely a primary emotion.
- Ask yourself, “Has my first emotion decreased or ‘gotten smaller’?” If so, it’s likely a primary emotion. If the feeling lingers for a long time, it’s probably secondary.
- Secondary emotions are often linked to thoughts of, “I *should not* feel sad,” or, “I *shouldn’t* be feeling this way.”
- Remember, the main difference between primary and secondary emotions is that primary emotions are how we *react* to events and situations, whereas secondary emotions are *reactions to how we feel!*

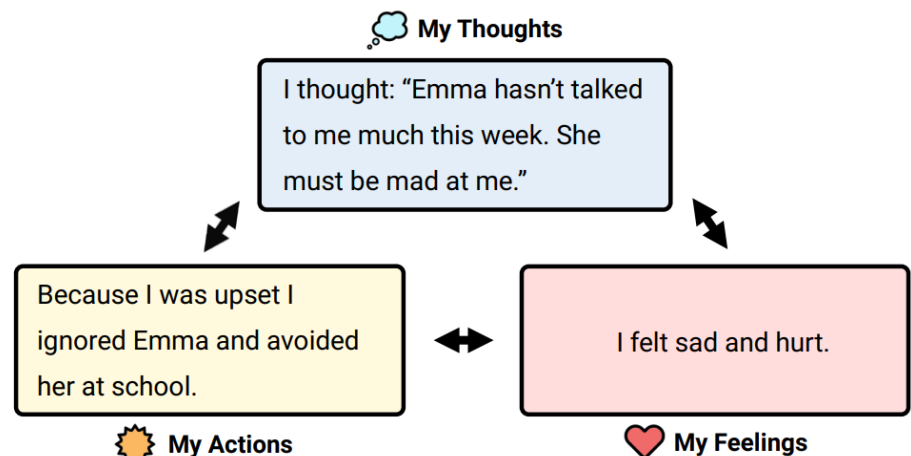
“Why Am I Feeling This Way?”

Even if we can recognize and label our emotions, it can still be frustrating when we don’t know what’s *causing* the feeling. According to Mind UK (2023), lots of different things can affect us and the way we feel:

- Problems at home, school, or with family and friends
- Being bullied or mistreated
- Losing someone important to you
- Big events or changes in your life
- Confusion about who you are, your beliefs, values, or sexuality
- Pressure to achieve or “do things perfectly” all the time
- Feeling lonely or misunderstood
- Worrying about things you see on social media or the news
- Experiencing something traumatic or frightening



Sometimes, there may not be an exact reason or cause for what you’re feeling, **and that’s okay too!** During moments like these, it’s important to remember how our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are connected. **Thoughts** are what we think about ourselves and situations. **Feelings** are part of our emotions and how we experience them. **Behaviors** are how we act or respond to the way we feel and think (Mind UK, 2023).



Emotion Regulation:

As children, we are born with some emotional responses, like crying, frustration, hunger, and pain (The Gottman Institute, 2023). However, as we grow older and experience more complex emotions, we need additional ways to regulate ourselves. Emotion regulation involves *knowing* what we are feeling, *exploring* why we are feeling it, and *choosing* what to do about it (Simply Psychology, 2023).

Self-regulation is our ability to handle or manage big emotions and behavior in the face of stress or a demanding situation.

It involves resisting certain impulses or behaviors, being flexible or adjusting to change, and calming oneself down.

APA (2023)
Child Mind Institute (2022)

Emotional dysregulation occurs when we struggle to self-regulate. Some of us have strong, emotional reactions with little to no warning. Others have distress that builds over time, leading to an outburst.

Our ability to regulate negative emotions depends on genetics, natural temperament, and the environment in which we grew up. Other factors, such as being hungry or tired, also affect self-regulation.

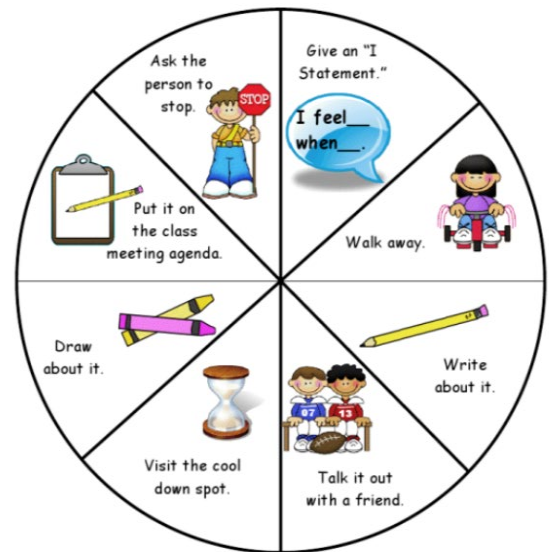
APA (2023)
Child Mind Institute (2022)

Emotion Regulation Tools:

Simply Psychology (2023)

- **Relaxation Exercises.** For stressful moments, it's important to have quick and easy strategies that can be used anywhere. Deep breathing, for example, can be done in many ways and is a great method to calm the nervous system. Progressive muscle relaxation (an exercise where you tense and relax different muscle groups), is another healthy way to self-regulate, and has been shown to decrease anger and aggression (Edutopia, 2021).
- **Journaling.** Writing things down can help you sort your thoughts and identify your feelings. Sometimes, journaling can be helpful when we are unsure what's bothering us – it can help those thoughts and feelings come to the surface. Whether you write a little or a lot, journaling is a great way to identify *and* regulate emotions!

The Wheel of Choice



- **Mindfulness.** This is a practice that is proven to increase one's awareness of themselves and their emotions. Whatever you may be experiencing, mindfulness teaches us to notice and accept our feelings without judgement.
- **Getting Creative.** Sometimes, it can be difficult to express our feelings using words. Channeling emotions into a creative outlet, such as dancing, drawing, writing, or music, is another productive way to self-regulate (Fort Behavioral Health, 2022). Gardening, cooking, and other hobbies also provide a sense of accomplishment, relaxation, and distraction from daily stressors (Charlie Health, 2023).
- **Talking It Out.** Talking to another person helps not only clarify what you may be feeling, but sharing what's bothering you with someone else usually helps us feel better. We are no longer alone in our stress and can now regulate through problem-solving or simply by feeling heard.
- **Exercise.** Moving your body is a great way to process emotions and work through stressors in a physical way (Fort Behavioral Health, 2022). Whether it's going to the gym, dancing, or yoga, exercise releases endorphins that can naturally improve your mood, decrease anxiety and depression, and promote better sleep (Charlie Health, 2023).
- **"Practice Runs."** When it comes to emotion regulation, don't avoid challenging or difficult situations! Rather, coach yourself through them by starting small in a supportive space. For example, maybe you get anxious in the grocery store or in other public spaces. Do a "practice run," by making a quick visit to the store with a family member or friend and engaging in deep-breathing or distraction (Child Mind Institute, 2022).



Additional Tips:

Practice Makes Progress! Emotion regulation needs to be approached just like any other skill: isolate that skill and practice (The Child Mind Institute, 2022). Just like you would study for a test or practice before a big game – the more you practice, the more progress you make. If things don't go perfectly the first time, try not to get frustrated – consistency is key.

But... Don't Practice During a Meltdown. If you're experiencing a big emotion, it's unlikely you will want to pause and express your feelings in words. Because of this, we need to practice self-regulation skills when we're *calm*, so they're easier to use during emotional or stressful moments. If you do have a rough moment or meltdown, discuss the incident with a trusted friend or family member after and talk about what could be done better next time.

Emotional Empowerment. It's important to take a moment to validate yourself and the "roller coaster" of emotions that life can be. Whether a teacher is calling on you in class or a friend just canceled plans at the last moment, you're likely dealing with multiple stressors of all different sizes every day. Empower yourself by normalizing stress (you're not the only one going through this!) and accepting your emotions as they come (Psych Central, 2021). When we view our emotions as valid, we begin to see feelings as normal and manageable (The Gottman Institute, 2023).

Know When to Seek Support. When problems begin to interfere with health, friends, family, school, and other aspects of daily life, it's time to seek outside support (APA, 2023). If you need additional help with self-regulation, consider reaching out to teachers, school counselors, or behavioral health professionals!

There's other help available

If you don't have a friend, family member or therapist you trust, you can reach out here:

- **Crisis Text Line:** Text [TALK to 741-741](#)
- **Teen Line:** (310) 855-HOPE or (800) TLC-TEEN
- Text "[TEEN](#)" to 839863
- **Trevor Project (for LGBTQ+ under 25)** 1-866-488-7386
- Text [START](#) to 678-678

Additional Materials & Resources:

Books: The Self-Regulation Workbook for Kids by Jenna Berman, The Big Feelings Survival Guide by Alyse Ruriani, Teaching Mindfulness Skills to Kids and Teens by Christopher Willard PsyD, Skills for Big Feelings by Casey O'Brien Martin

Videos:

Emotion Regulation with James J. Gross, PhD

<https://youtu.be/Yd6hR1qCfSM>

Coping Skills for Kids

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs-MyQgfH3A>

Emotion Regulation Activity

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORRdf_nLc_I

Apps: Mood Meter (Marc Brackett, Ph.D.), Smiling Mind, Daylio, Insight Timer, Headspace, Calm, Sanvello, Mindshift CBT, Meditation Mountain on Spotify

Podcasts: On Our Minds with Ashley and Tyler (PBS), Mostly Mindful for Teens and Tweens, She Persisted: Your Teen Mental Health Resource

References:

Adapted from: American Psychological Association (2023)

Adapted from: Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

Adapted from: Child-Mind Institute (2022)

Adapted from: Edutopia (2021)

Adapted from: The Gottman Institute (2023)

Adapted from: Mind (2023)

Adapted from: The Movement for Children's Mental Health (2021, 2023)

Adapted from: Simply Psychology (2023)

Adapted from: Vanderbilt University