

# HOW TO HELP CHILDREN MANAGE ANGER AND OTHER STRONG EMOTIONS

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How to help your students understand their emotions and learn to self-regulate

# HOW TO HELP CHILDREN MANAGE ANGER AND OTHER STRONG EMOTIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

More and more children are finding it difficult to manage strong emotions.

Teachers report that their students are:

- Less aware of their emotions as they happen - and have a more limited emotional vocabulary than pupils in previous years
- More likely to become overwhelmed by their feelings, resulting in anger outbursts or meltdowns
- Less able to use calming strategies to regulate those emotions

In this guide, we've outlined a simple, practical step-by-step plan to help your students self-regulate in school. With repetition and time, these evidence-based methods have shown to be effective with a range of school-aged children.

The end-result will be pupils who are more able to cope the demands of the school day, recognise and successfully manage strong emotions, and achieve their potential within the classroom.

To your success (and the success of your students),

*S. Cumgan*

Simon Currihan

*E Shackleton*

Emma Shackleton





# SELF CONTROL vs SELF-REGULATION

More and more children are finding it hard to control strong emotions. The result? Anger outbursts, tears, refusal, playground fights and pupils walking out of class.

None of these emotional states lead to productive learning... or happiness in general.

However, our goal in this booklet isn't to encourage children to exert more self-control. Self-control means attempting to squash strong emotions **after** they've occurred.

Instead, our aim is to help them self-regulate. That means understanding when their emotions are rising - and taking early action **before** becoming overwhelmed by anger or anxiety.

***“Self-regulation will always be a challenge, but if somebody’s going to be in charge, it might as well be me.”***

*Daniel Akst*

## Why?

Studies show that we all - adults and children - have finite amounts of self-control. The more you use up, the less you have left over. Throwing stress into the mix eats up your resources even faster..

In short - the harder you try, the more likely you are to fail.

And once those reserves are gone, our emotions will spill over like they always did in the past. Only this time, because the child failed to 'control themselves', they'll carry feelings of regret, guilt and weakness.

By definition, by the time you experience anger, it's too late for self-control. And it's not just anger: it's any strong emotion that creates stress. Like anxiety, or fear.



So let's put self-control to one side. Instead, our aim will be to teach the child self-regulate. That means:

- Helping the child to be more aware of how they feel on the inside...
- ...so they can take action before their emotions grow too strong and hijack their decision making.

Once we're experiencing strong emotions (high stress), we're at the mercy of our body's fight-or-flight response... and good luck controlling that. It's your body's automatic reaction to a life threatening encounter.

So it makes sense to help your students self-regulate their emotions before they become too strong to cope with.

## A driving analogy:



### **Self-regulation:**

"I'll monitor the road ahead. If I see a danger, I'll be able to take evasive action long before crashing."



### **Self-control:**

"I'll drive without paying attention. Oh %\*@! I'm crashing! I'll slam on the brakes and hope for the best."

## KEY CONCEPT

Managing strong emotions with self-control is likely to fail because self-control is reactive and our reserves of self-control are limited. Focus on pre-emptive self-regulation instead.

# Moving towards self-regulation

To help your student learn self-regulation, we're going to use an emotion tracker.

The emotion tracker is a simple scale, like a number line running from 1 to 10. The aim is for the student to rate how strongly they're experiencing a strong emotion at any one time.

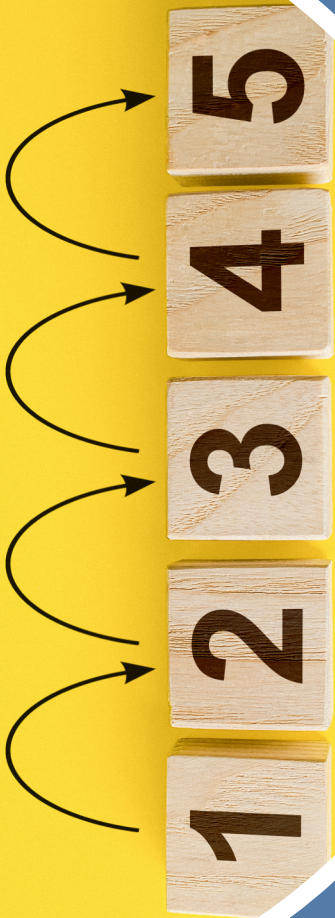
In the examples below, I'm going to focus on anger. You could equally use the tracker to help students cope with other strong emotions like anxiety or fear.

For anger, a '1' on the emotion tracker would represent a calm or relaxed state. 10 would represent full blown anger.

The tracker will help your student realise that emotions are not binary. As humans, we don't flip between 'calm' and 'angry'.

Instead, our emotions exist on a scale. We start out feeling calm or relaxed, and then experience increasing degrees of stress before our body actually reaches anger (a fight-or-flight response).

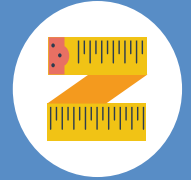
So our anger isn't 'on' or 'off' like a light-switch. It's more like a dimmer switch, with a range of values.



# A SAMPLE EMOTION TRACKER



## My emotion tracker



1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

When I reach a 6 or 7, I will....



### Instructions:

1. Write the student's name at the top of the tracker.
2. Write the names of two opposite emotions under the numbers 1 and 10 (eg. calm and angry, relaxed and stressed, calm and anxious)
3. Write the student's agreed action/calming strategy to use when they feel they've reached squares 6/7/8.
4. Cut off the tracker along the dotted line (removing these instructions).
5. Laminate the tracker.
6. Place the tracker where the student will see it often (eg. stick it to their table/desk).
7. Ask them to tell you their 'when' target twice a day (keeping it top of mind) or before known problem areas (eg. playtime, writing lessons)
8. Throughout the day, as many times as possible, ask the student the point to the square that represents how they feel. This encourages them to continually monitor their emotions.



# YOUR STUDENT'S GOAL



## USE THEIR EMOTION TRACKER, TO:

- Recognise when their emotions are becoming stronger (reaching a 6 or 7 on their tracker)
- Use this as a trigger to use an appropriate calming strategy to manage (regulate) their emotions before that feeling overwhelms them

# HOW TO USE THE EMOTION TRACKER

1. Start by printing out an emotion tracker for your student. Write their name at the top.
2. In consultation with the student, get them to write two words that express polar opposites of the emotion they have difficulty managing. For instance, 'calm and angry'. Write them under the tracker, beneath squares 1 and 10.
3. (optional) Add a third label, such as 'frustrated' under square 6.

## WHY ADD LABELS?

Research shows that when we're able to put a word to an emotion, it can reduce how intensely we experience it. Over time, the aim is to increase the breadth of the child's emotional vocabulary.

4. Talk through with your student that the intensity of this emotion can go up and down, like the volume control on a television. The emotion is not experienced as 'on or off'.
5. Practise identifying how strongly they would experience that emotion in different situations. (e.g. what number would you give sitting at home, enjoying a favourite game? what number would you reach when told 'no' by an adult? what number would you normally be at in the classroom, playground, at home? During maths, English, art, music, assembly?)
6. Explain that the time for the child to take action is when they feel they've reached one of the yellow squares on the tracker (6 or 7) - because that's when they'll be able to make the best decisions.
7. Write down an agreed calming strategy that the child will use when they reach the yellow squares.

8. Cut off the bottom half of the page. Laminate the emotional tracker and place it where the student will see it throughout the day (eg. on their desk).

9. At least twice a day, ask the child to remind you of their calming strategy for when they reach a yellow square. Now build in coaching times during the week where the pupil can rehearse using their strategy with an adult **when they are already calm**, so the new behaviour becomes automatic. Give praise and recognition for using the calming strategy.

10. At routine times of the day ask the child to identify how strongly they're experiencing that emotion by tapping a square from 1 to 10. This can be done in seconds and doesn't have to involve a deep discussion. Transition times are a good time to fit this in. The aim is to improve your pupil's awareness of their emotions on a moment-by-moment basis. After all, if the child isn't aware they are becoming frustrated (say, a 6 on their chart), they can't act on that information.

11. Now rinse and repeat. Stick with the approach and don't expect to see change immediately. This is an approach that yields results in the medium term (after several weeks).

With time and repetition, your student will link a trigger (rising emotions) with a habitual, automatic behaviour (using their agreed calming strategy).



Practising mindfulness has also been shown to improve children's awareness of their thoughts and emotions as they happen... meaning they're more able to act on them in a positive way.



***“Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day-in and day-out.”***

*Robert Collier*

# NEXT STEPS

When used consistently - over time - the emotion tracker will:

- Help your student grow more aware of their emotions as they arise
- Help your student understand the strength of their emotions - and that they sit on a scale of intensity (they aren't 'on' or 'off')
- Know what to do when they feel an emotion becoming more intense

Good luck! Don't forget, we also have lots of extra resources about student behaviour and classroom management on our website - see the next page for some useful links.





## Get In Touch

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Help for schools, teachers and families when behaviour gets in the way of success