

# Strategies for Caregivers to Support Emotion Regulation

Rebecca Shaffer, Psy.D.

Professor of Pediatrics

Cincinnati Children's Hospital



Department of  
Defense grant for  
RCT of Regulating  
Together

NIH Ro1 of Canine  
Assisted RT

Author of Regulating  
Together and receive  
compensation for  
trainings

**Research  
Support and  
Conflicts**

# THANK YOU

- Co-Authors of Regulating Together
  - Lauren Schmitt and Jenna Ruberg
- My trainees past and present: Debra Reisinger, Marika Coffman, Sungeun Kang, Walker McKinney, Lisa Geis, & Allison Birnschein
- The Shaffer Lab and Broader Neurobehavioral Research Team

A HUGE thank you to all the families who have participated in our program over the past 10 years. Your commitment and feedback have fueled this program and research!!!





# What is Emotion Regulation?

# What is emotion **regulation**?

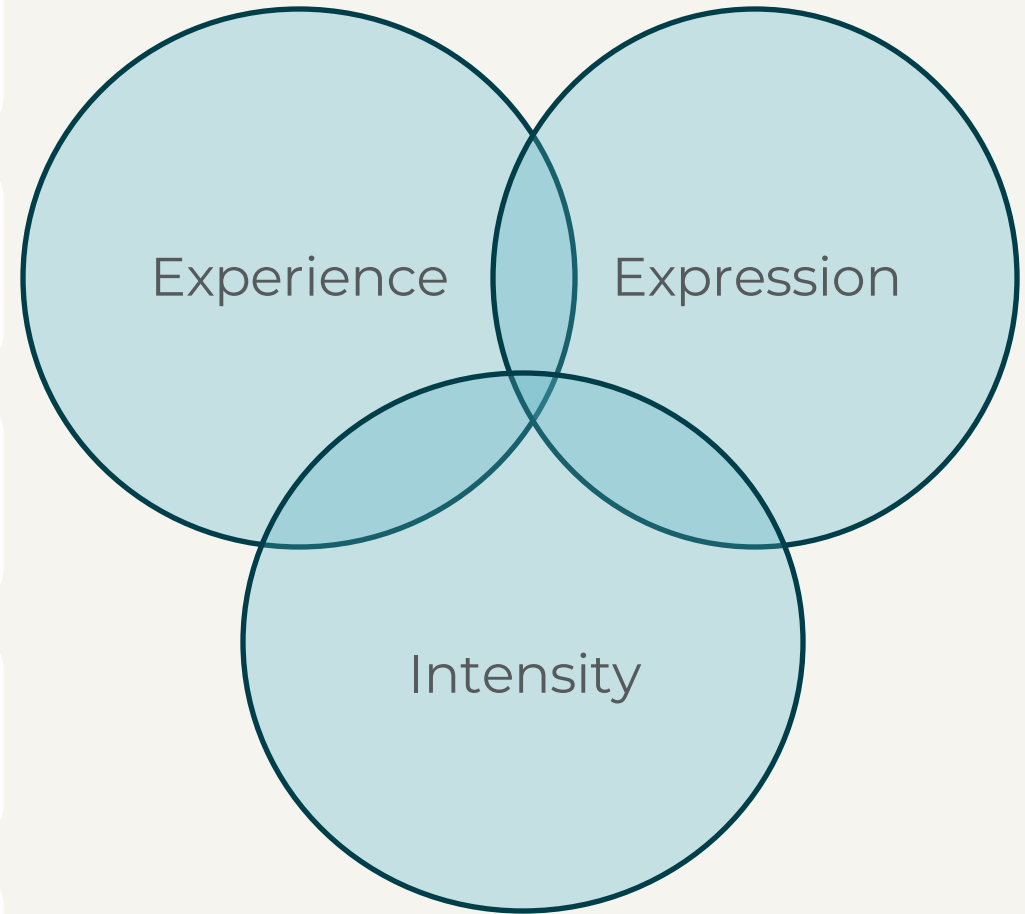
Controlling, managing, adjusting the experience, intensity, and expression of emotions

Appropriate expressions or responses for the situation

Purposeful or unconscious

Usually includes the use of coping skills

Staying calm in the midst of stress or triggers



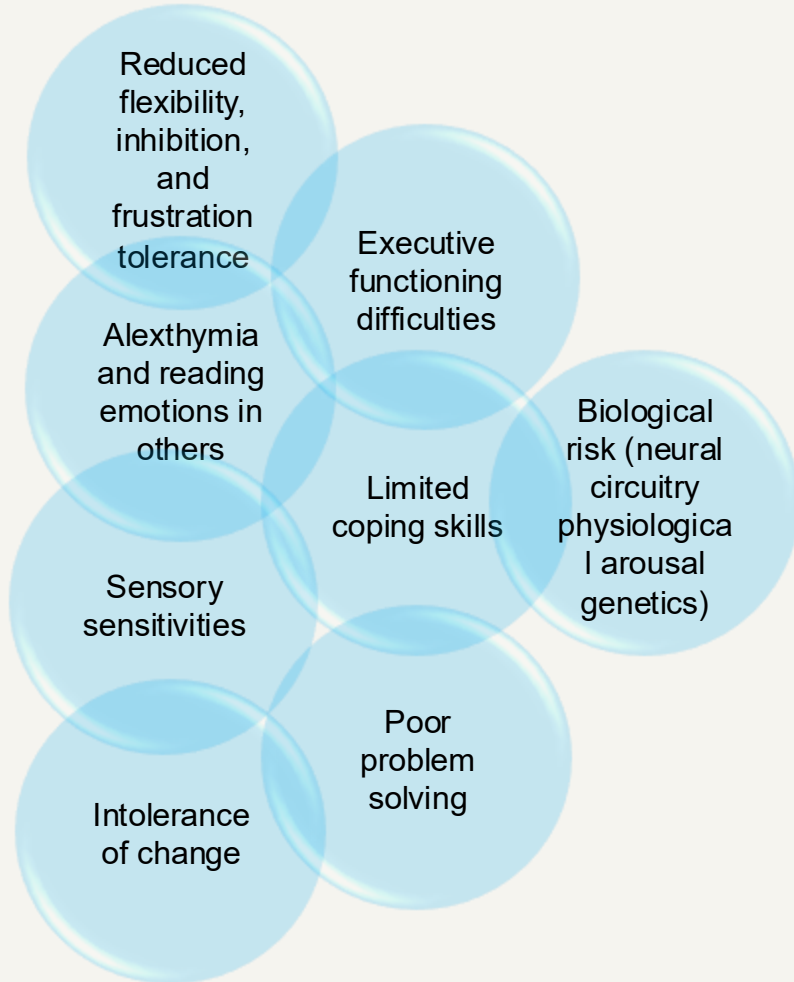
# What is emotion dysregulation?

- Reactive and easily triggered
  - (“0 to 100”)
- Tantrums
- Aggression
- Outbursts
- Meltdowns
- Difficulty calming down once upset

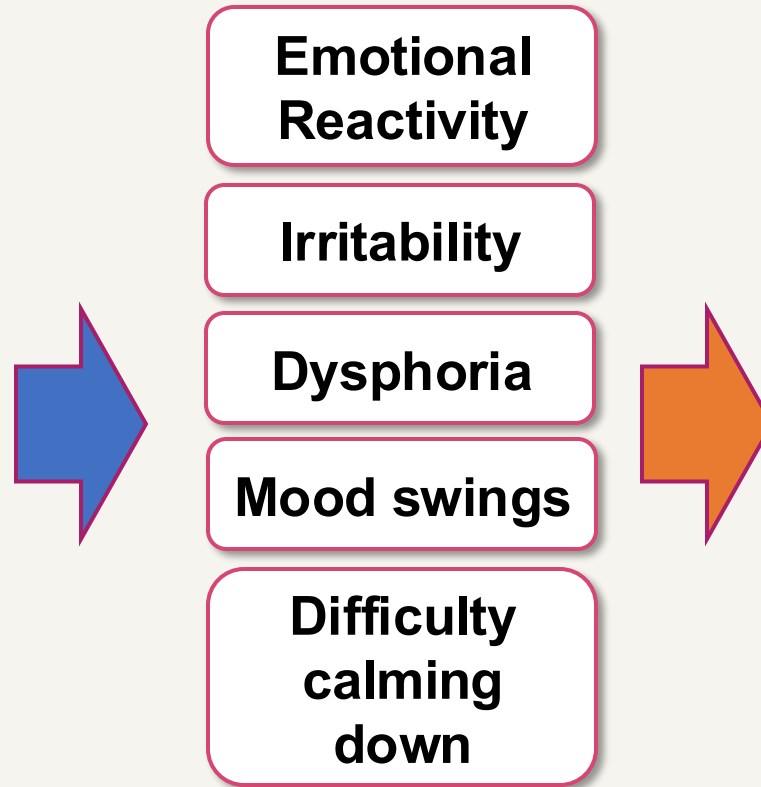


# Poor Outcomes Associated with ED In ASD

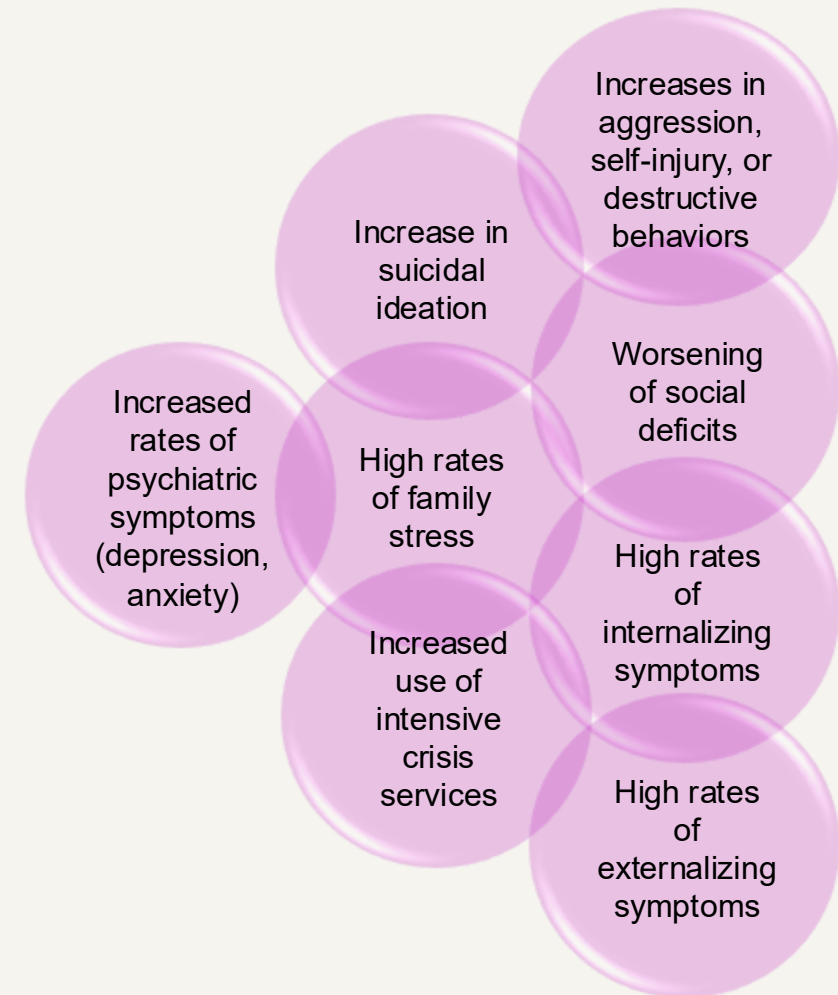
## ASD-Specific Predispositions



## Emotion Dysregulation



## Poor Outcomes





# Caregiver Role in Emotion Regulation

# Caregiver Role

Your Own  
Emotion  
Regulation

Creating a  
Supportive,  
Caring  
Environment

Teaching  
and  
Reinforcing  
Emotion  
Regulation  
Skills

# Caregiver Emotion Regulation

- It is important to take care of yourself!
  - Put on your own oxygen mask first
  - Deep breathing and muscle relaxation works for everyone!
  - Apps can be very helpful to create relaxation and mindfulness practices
  - Positive self-statements like “I’m a great caregiver,” “I’m doing my best,” & “This will pass” can be very helpful!
  - Therapy is always, always a good idea 😊



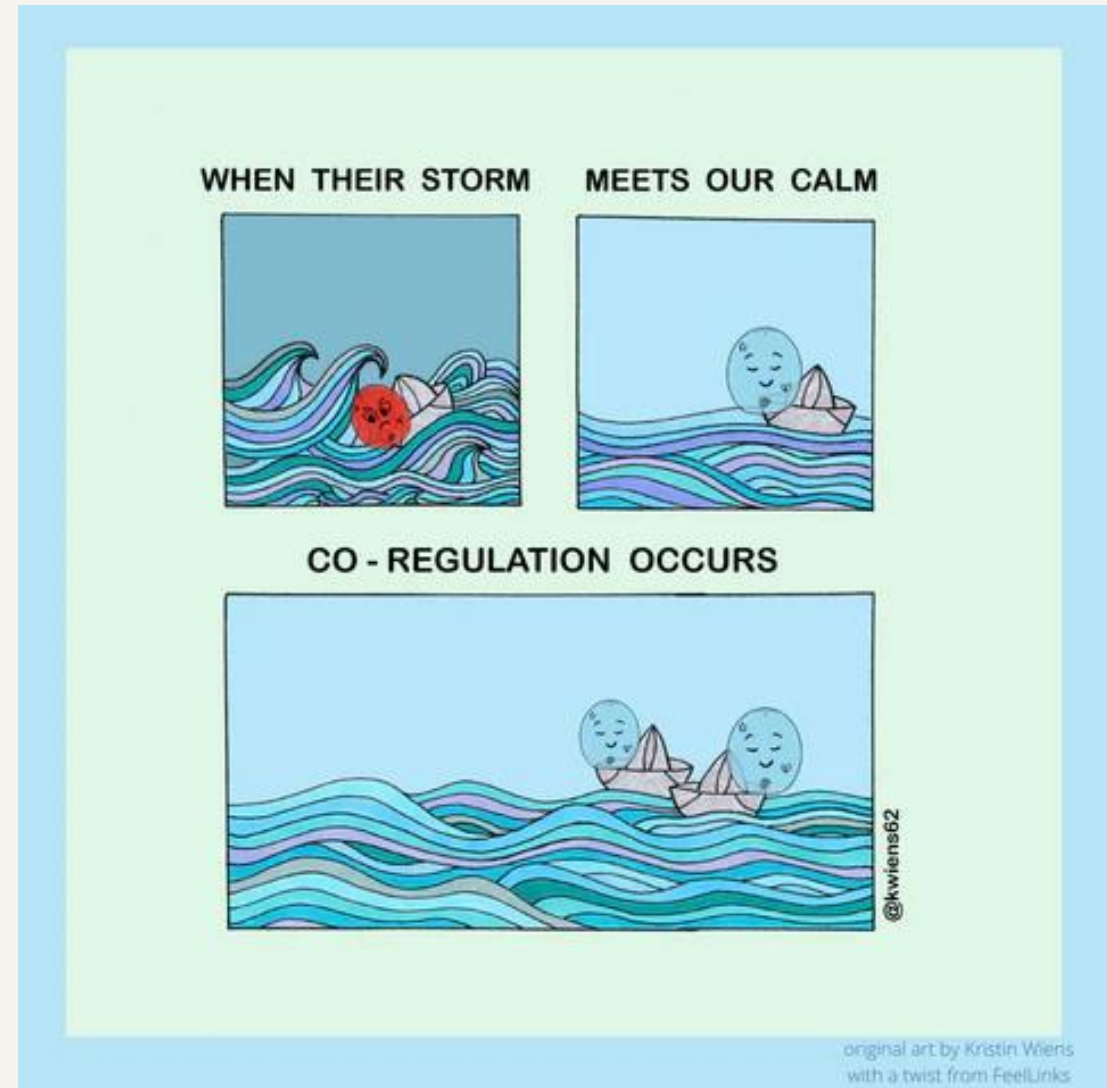
# Caregiver Emotion Regulation

- Build a network of support
  - Who supports you?
  - Who supports your child?
- Think about when and how to lean into supports



# Co-Regulation

- You are their first regulation model
  - In how you handle your own stressors
  - In how you handle your child's dysregulation
  - It is important to model experiencing and managing emotions
- Use regulation skills to stay calm in the moment
- Physiological responses may mirror each other, passively assisting in calming



# Across Development

Early in development, children learn to regulate from caregivers

- Co-regulation is an important first step
- Caregivers manage the environment and provide support

As children grow, they start to regulate emotions on their own

- This is not linear, it ebbs and flows over time
- It is often a slower process for autistic children

Some developmental periods require more support

- Preschool
- Adolescence

When will they do this on their own?

- Depends on many factors and likely changes often
- Children often apply skills to others first
- Be ready to scaffold or adjust your level of support as needed



# Emotion Regulation Skills

# Emotion Regulation Skills

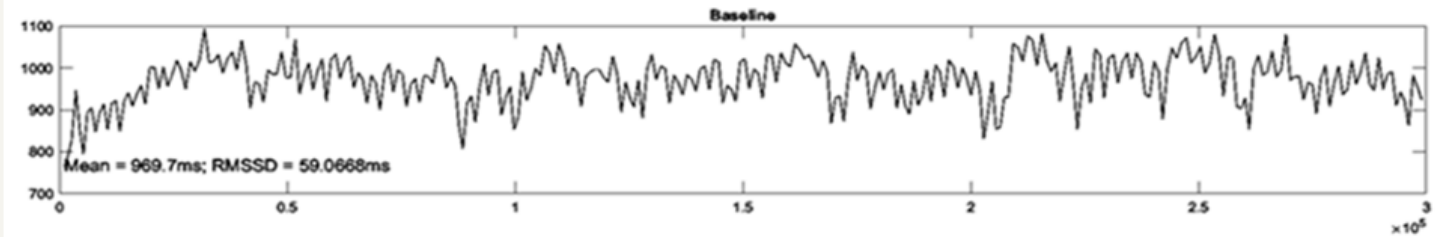
- Place visuals of skills around your home or school
- Create a common language to be used across home, school, or other activities.
  - Consistency is key
- These skills are best taught when calm.
  - They require LOTS of practice, also when calm.
  - To reduce pressure, make it a family activity to practice skills.
- They may first apply the skills to others or expect you to do it first.
  - This means they are learning and processing how the skills work
  - It is a GREAT sign!
- Reward practice, attempts, prompted & independent use of skills.
- Many of these skills are from the Regulating Together intervention

# Emotion Regulation Skills

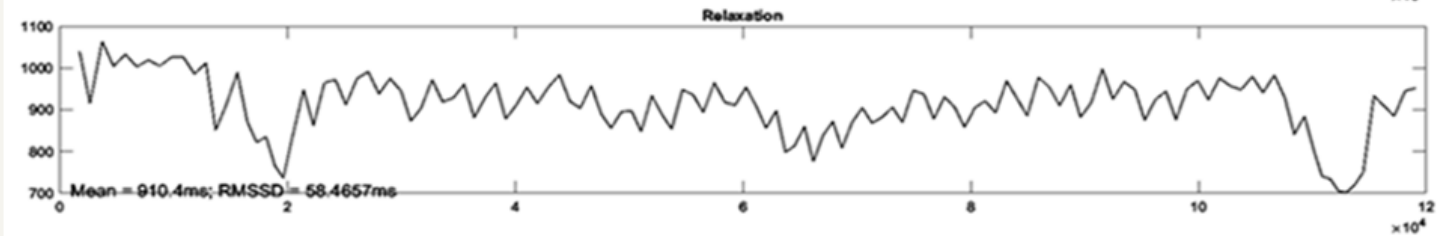
## BREATHING SKILLS

- Deep breathing helps provides oxygen to the brain while creating a “pause”
- It is an important skill that will continue to be helpful far into the future

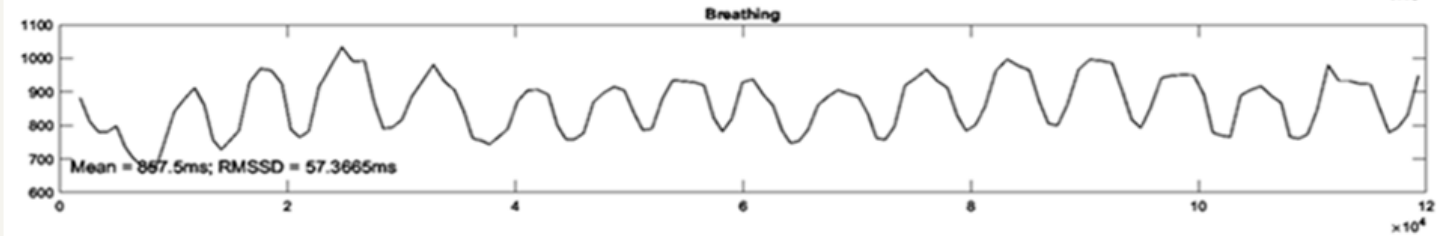
Baseline



Relax



Breathing



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## BREATHING SKILLS

### FIGURE 8 BREATHING

Start at the sun and follow the arrows in the figure eight with your finger to complete one deep breath!



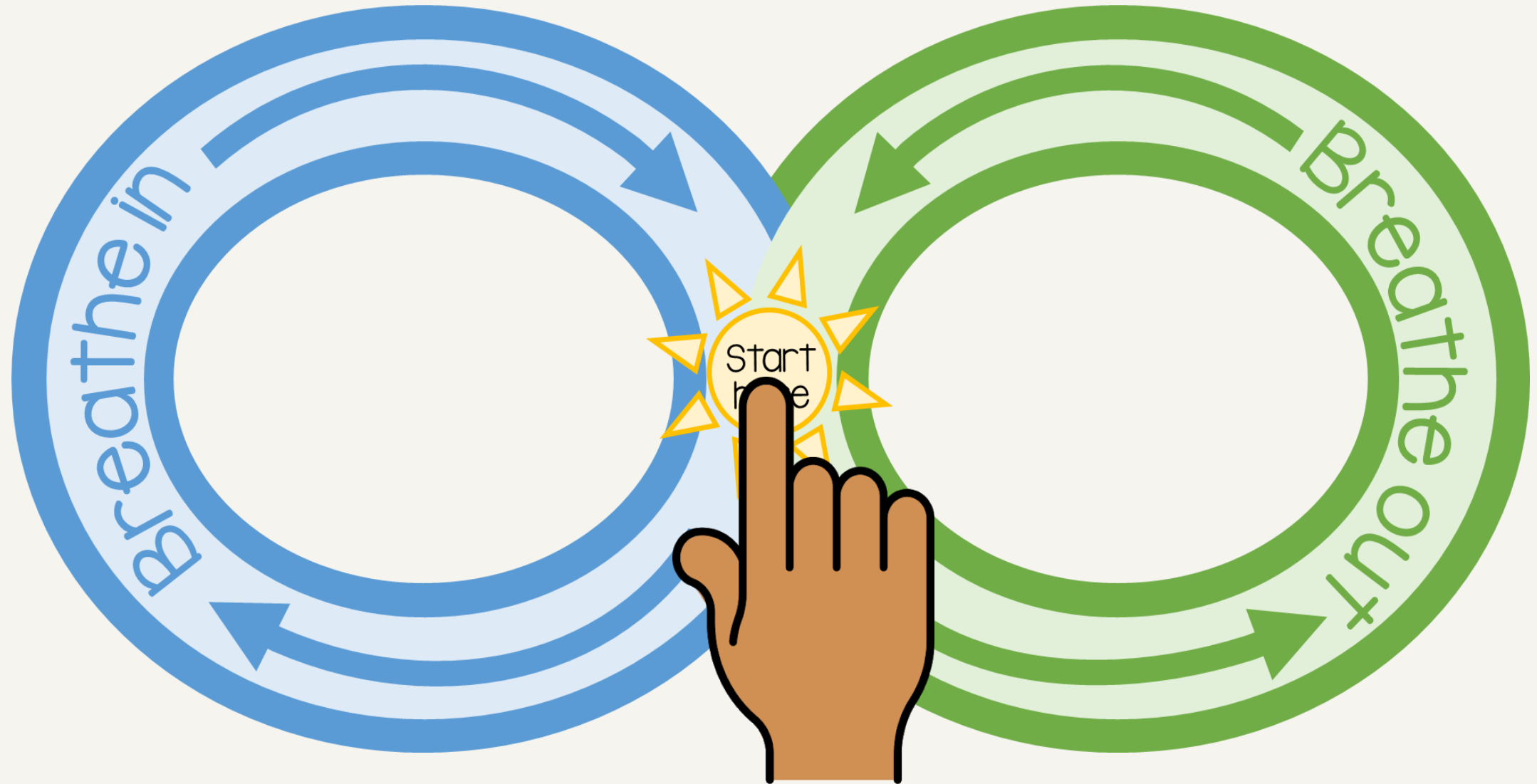
### TRIANGLE BREATHING

Start at the sun and follow the sides around the whole triangle with your finger to complete one deep breath!



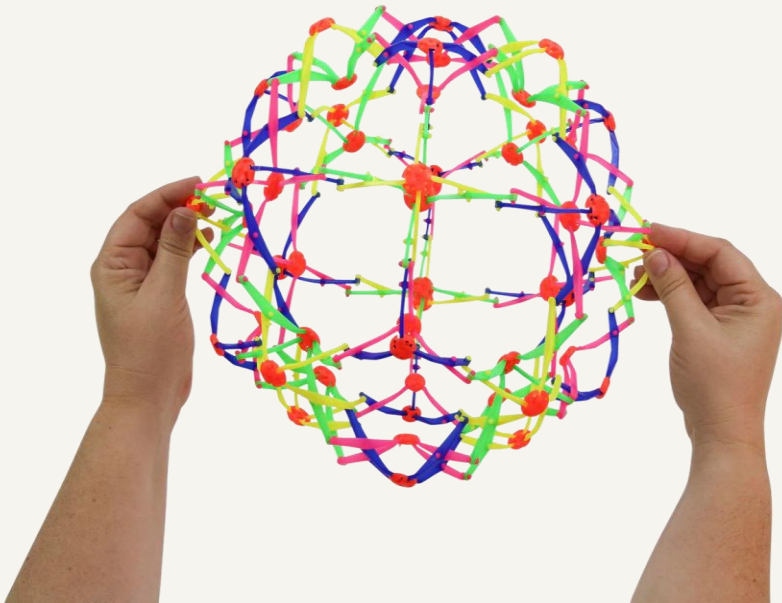
[Animated Triangle Breathing:](https://regulatingtogether.com/)  
<https://regulatingtogether.com/>

# Emotion Regulation Skills



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## ADAPTING BREATHING SKILLS



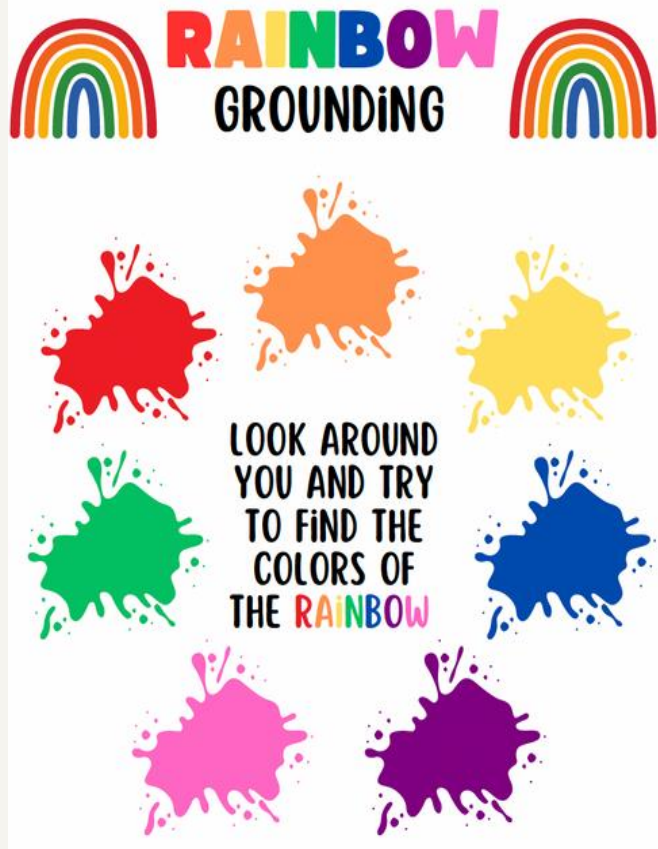
# Emotion Regulation Skills

- When muscles relax, thoughts and breathing follow
- These are all pretend skills
- May need to start with a real object first
  - Stress ball
- Advanced version
  - Progressive Muscle Relaxation
  - Many videos available on YouTube



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## MINDFULNESS





Why did the Easter bunnies get the job?

Because he had the most qualifications.

# Emotion Regulation Skills

## MINDFULNESS



Mindful Eating

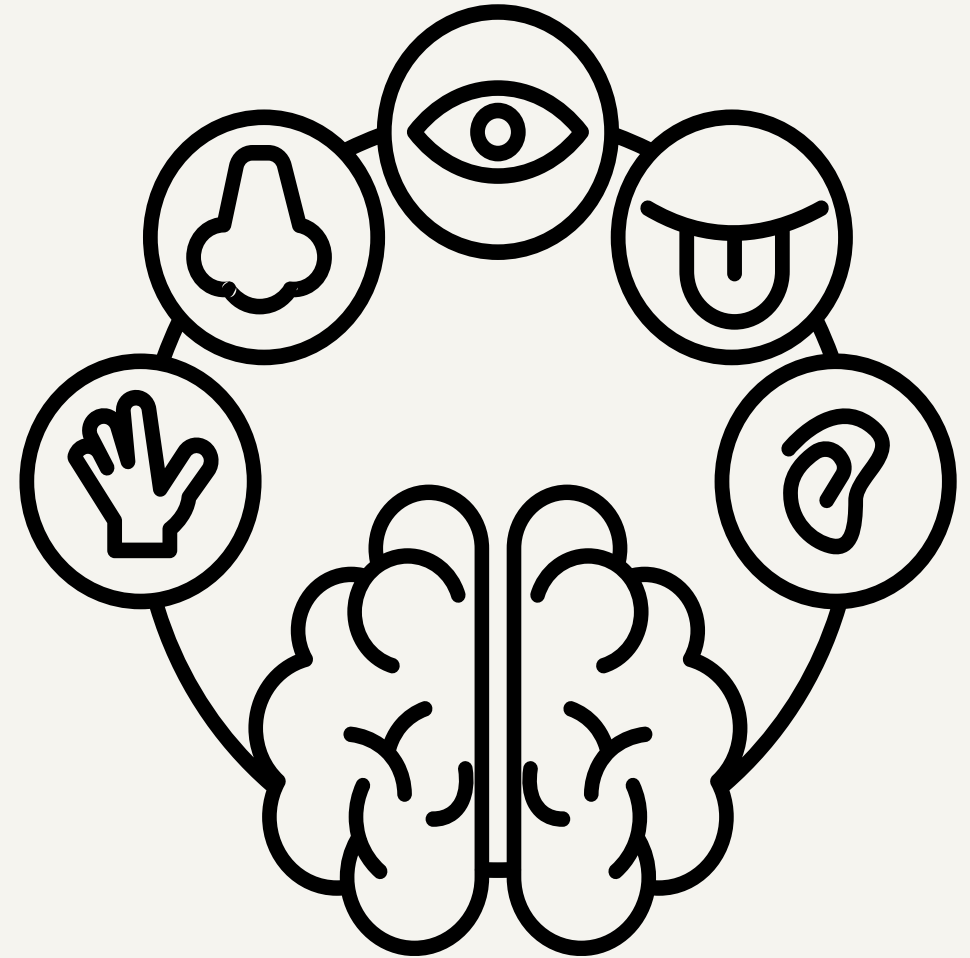
## Mindful Movement



# Emotion Regulation Skills

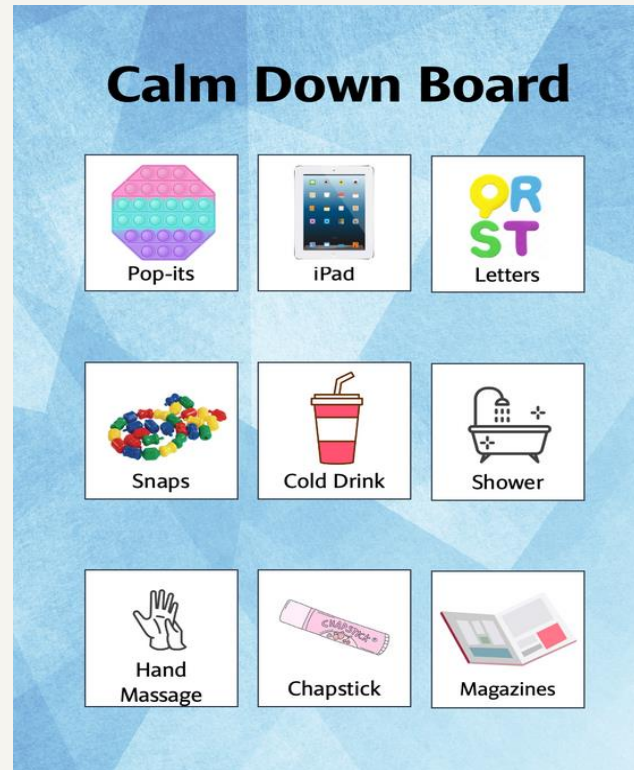
## Self-Soothing Strategies

- Use all 5 senses
  - Sight: watch a movie
  - Sound: Listen to music
  - Touch: Cuddly blanket, soft sweatshirt
  - Smell: Candle or lotion
  - Taste: Eat something you love



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## COPING TOOLBOX & CALMING SPOT



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## ADDRESS SENSORY NEEDS

- Sensory needs or overstimulation can lead to emotion dysregulation
- Create opportunities to address sensory needs throughout the day, including movement
- Identify sensory activities that are calming & ones that are stimulating



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## TEACH EMOTION IDENTIFICATION

- Start simple and build with understanding
- Label emotions throughout the day
  - In you and in your child
  - This teaches the words in the moment
- Provide visuals and tools to communicate in the moment
- Over time, build awareness of emotional intensity
- Help recognize signs early and prevents escalation
- **Goal is for emotion language to become a part of the culture of the home**

# Emotion Regulation Skills

## TEACH EMOTION IDENTIFICATION

**5** I FEEL OUT OF CONTROL 

**4** I FEEL MAD, SAD OR ANXIOUS 

**3** I FEEL TRIGGERED 

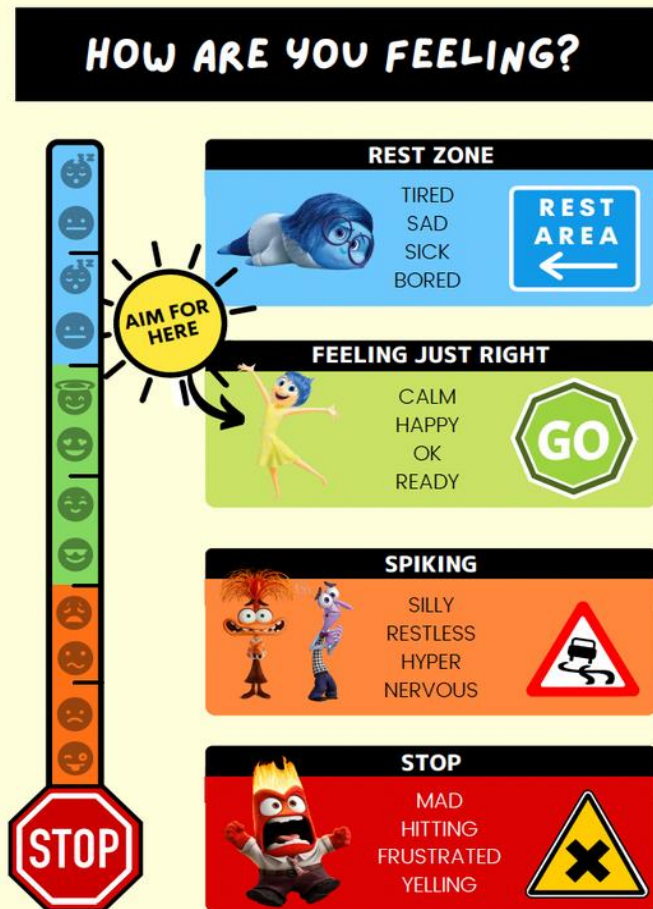
**2** I FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE 

**1** I FEEL CALM & IN CONTROL 



©2021 Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. All rights reserved.

### HOW ARE YOU FEELING?




**REST ZONE**  
TIRED  
SAD  
SICK  
BORED  
**REST AREA** ←


**FEELING JUST RIGHT**  
CALM  
HAPPY  
OK  
READY  
**GO**


**SPIKING**  
SILLY  
RESTLESS  
HYPER  
NERVOUS

**STOP**  
MAD  
HITTING  
FRUSTRATED  
YELLING

### 3-POINT SCALE

**3** I FEEL OUT OF CONTROL! 

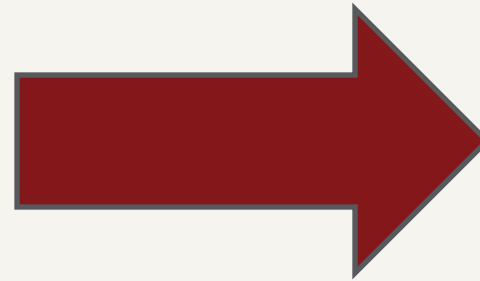
**2** I FEEL MAD, SAD, or ANXIOUS 

**1** I FEEL CALM & IN CONTROL 

# Emotion Regulation Skills

## TEACH EMOTION IDENTIFICATION

- 5** I FEEL OUT OF CONTROL 
- 4** I FEEL MAD, SAD OR ANXIOUS 
- 3** I FEEL TRIGGERED 
- 2** I FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE 
- 1** I FEEL CALM & IN CONTROL 



I FEEL



I NEED



# Emotion Identification



1



2



3



4



5

Your iPad is dead

You are going out to eat

Your brother touches your game

You go to an amusement park

Someone asks you to play

You get to fly on an airplane

Someone at school or work hits you

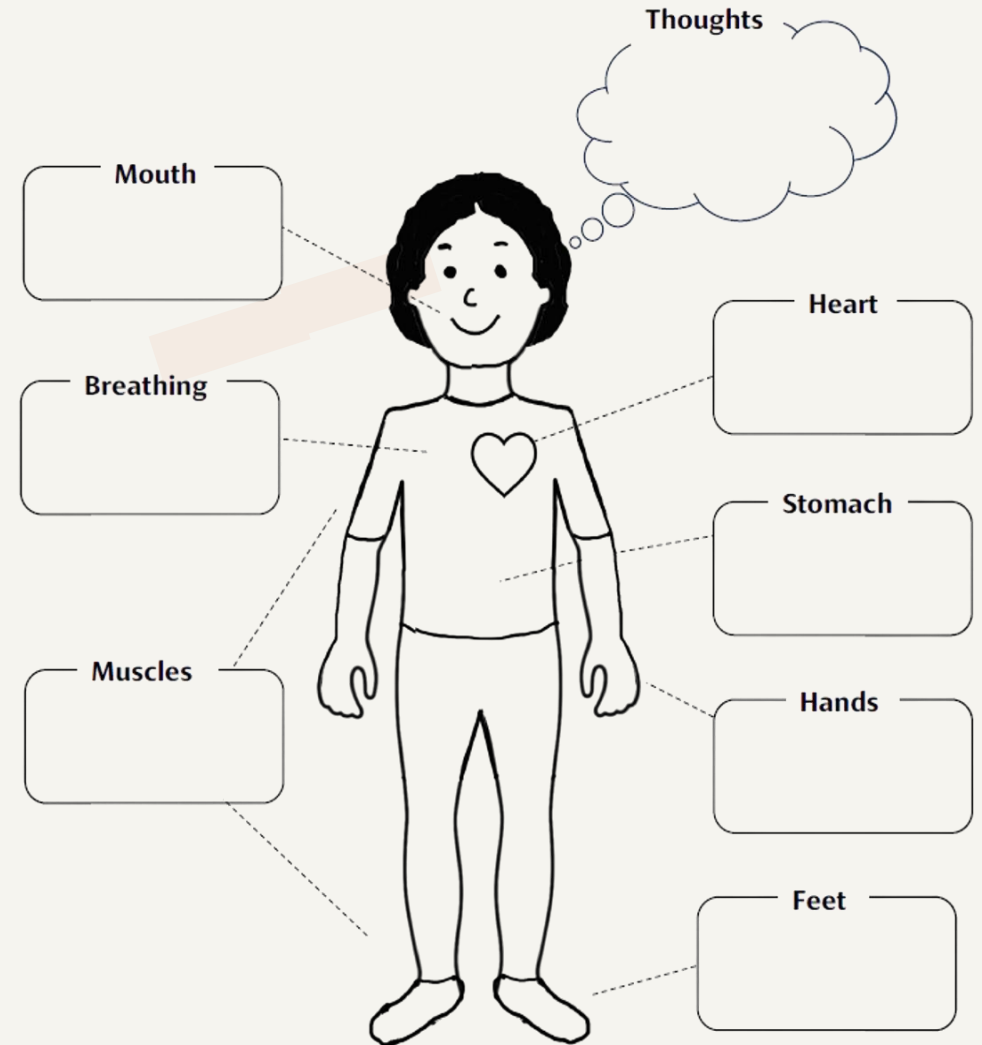
You have to go somewhere new



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## BODY AWARENESS OF EMOTIONS

- Point out body signs when calm
  - You look calm! Your breathing is slow.
- Start to help them also see what happens to their bodies when upset.
  - You seem like you might be feeling upset. You are pacing a lot and your hands are clenched.
- Point it out about yourself, too!



# Emotion Regulation Skills

## SIZE THE PROBLEM

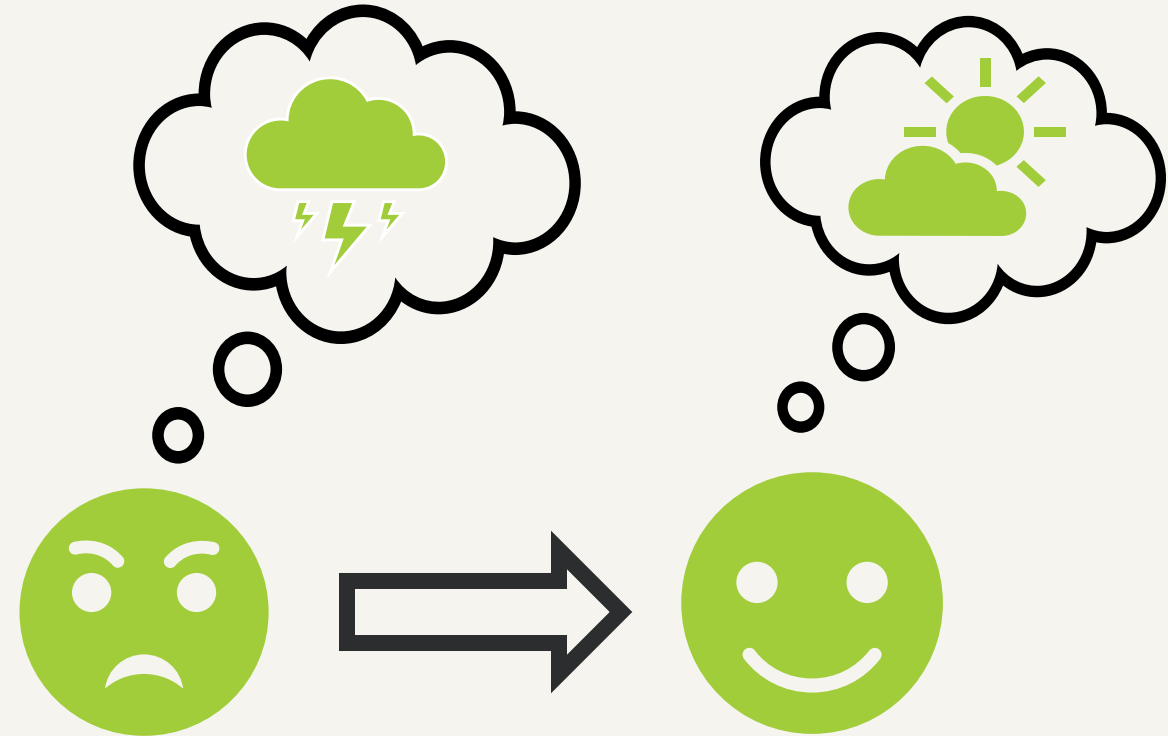


- We want to identify problems based on what size it is for MOST PEOPLE
  - Think of the bus driver or a waiter
- Reactions should fit the size of the problem.
- Point out small, medium, and large problems as they happen
- Can be adapted to Small Deal or Big Deal
  - Is this a Small Deal or a Big Deal?

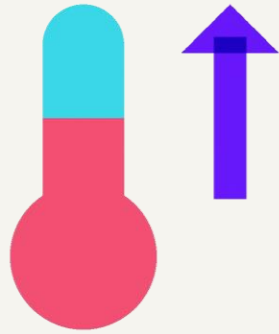
# Emotion Regulation Skills

## POSITIVE INNER VOICE

- Model positive statements
- Praise your child in front of others
  - Correct privately
- Recognize positives throughout the day
- Practice positivity- ask them to share something positive each day
- When you hear negative statements, help them flip to a positive
- Inner Coach vs. Inner Critic



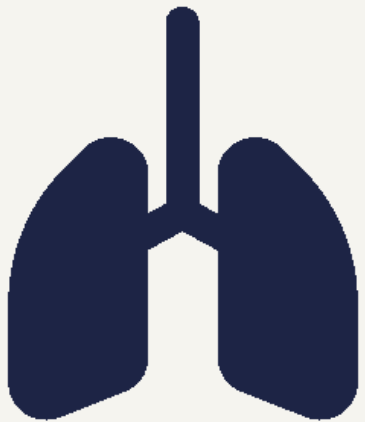
# Emotion Regulation Skills



Temperature



Intense Exercise



Paced Breathing



Progressive Muscle  
Relaxation

## TIPP

- Ideally these steps are done all together, but if one is more calming it can be done alone.
- This activates our internal Rest and Slow System, the Parasympathetic System
- It works to shift the Fight or Flight Response and focuses the body on other processes.

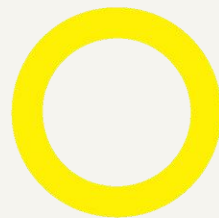
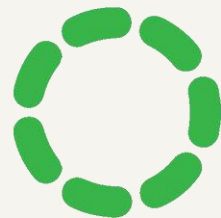


**My Kid Knows It... Now How  
Can I Get Them to Use It?**

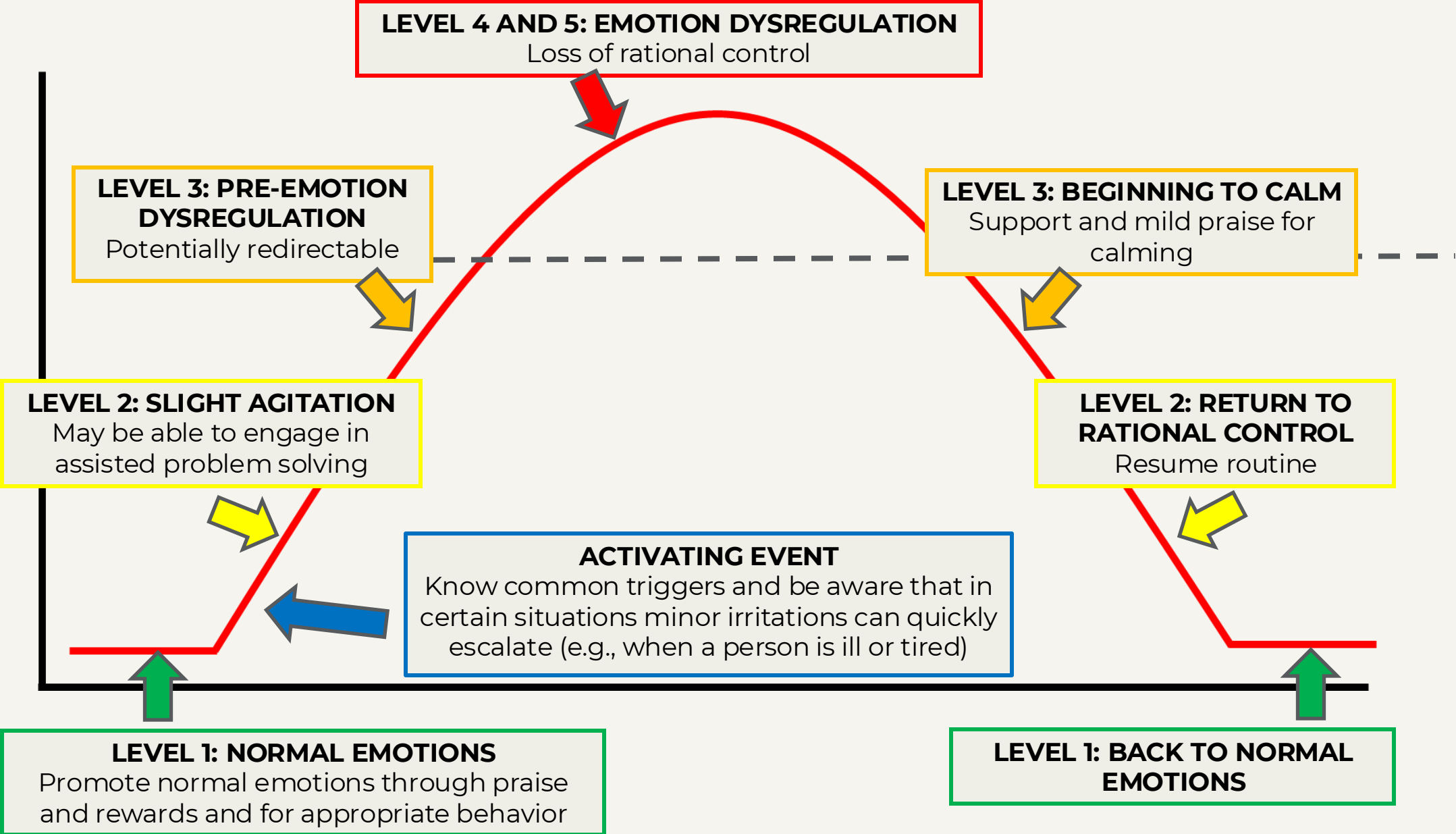
# USING SKILLS

## BE PROACTIVE!

- Given they may be at risk of dysregulation, what strategies are we using throughout the day proactively to help with coping and relaxing?
  - Don't wait for them to escalate before prompting skill use
  - Adjust level of support as needed



# Levels of Emotion: Wave of Dysregulation



# REWARDING SKILL USE

## REWARD SYSTEM TIPS

Reward practice of skills

Independent use of skills should be doubly rewarded

Reward frequency should be based on developmental level

Certain number of practice or skill use

Tokens/points turned in for prizes OR rewarded immediately

Visual reminders of skills & rewards

Make it feasible for both you and your child

Reward must be reserved for the token/point system only







Do **NOT** take tokens/points away

When there are big life events or schedule changes, bring back rewards

# REWARDING SKILL USE

## REWARD SYSTEM TIPS

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Practice Deep Breathing							
Practice Muscle Relaxation							
Rate How I Feel							

**REWARD MENU:**

Reward	Points
Earning a stuffed animal	100
Pick where we eat	60
Car wash	15
Pick out what to watch on TV	10
Earn extra pop tickets	2

# INTERVENTIONS

- **Interventions for emotion dysregulation are growing in autism with strong research support!**
  - **Regulating Together**
  - **Emotional Awareness and Skills Enhancement Program: EASE**
  - **Secret Agent Society- Operation Regulation**
  - **Exploring Feelings: CBT for Anger and Anxiety**
  - **Exploring Feelings for Young Children with High-Functioning Autism**

# SUMMARY

- **Caregivers play an important role in emotion regulation development**
- **Level of needed support ebbs and flows throughout development**
- **Skills must be taught during times of calm before used when upset**
- **Reinforce skill use**
- **Make emotion regulation language part of the culture of your home**
- **Take care of yourself as a caregiver**
- **Interventions are available and effective**



# Thank you!

✉ [Rebecca.Shaffer@cchmc.org](mailto:Rebecca.Shaffer@cchmc.org)

📱 [Regulatingtogether.com](http://Regulatingtogether.com)